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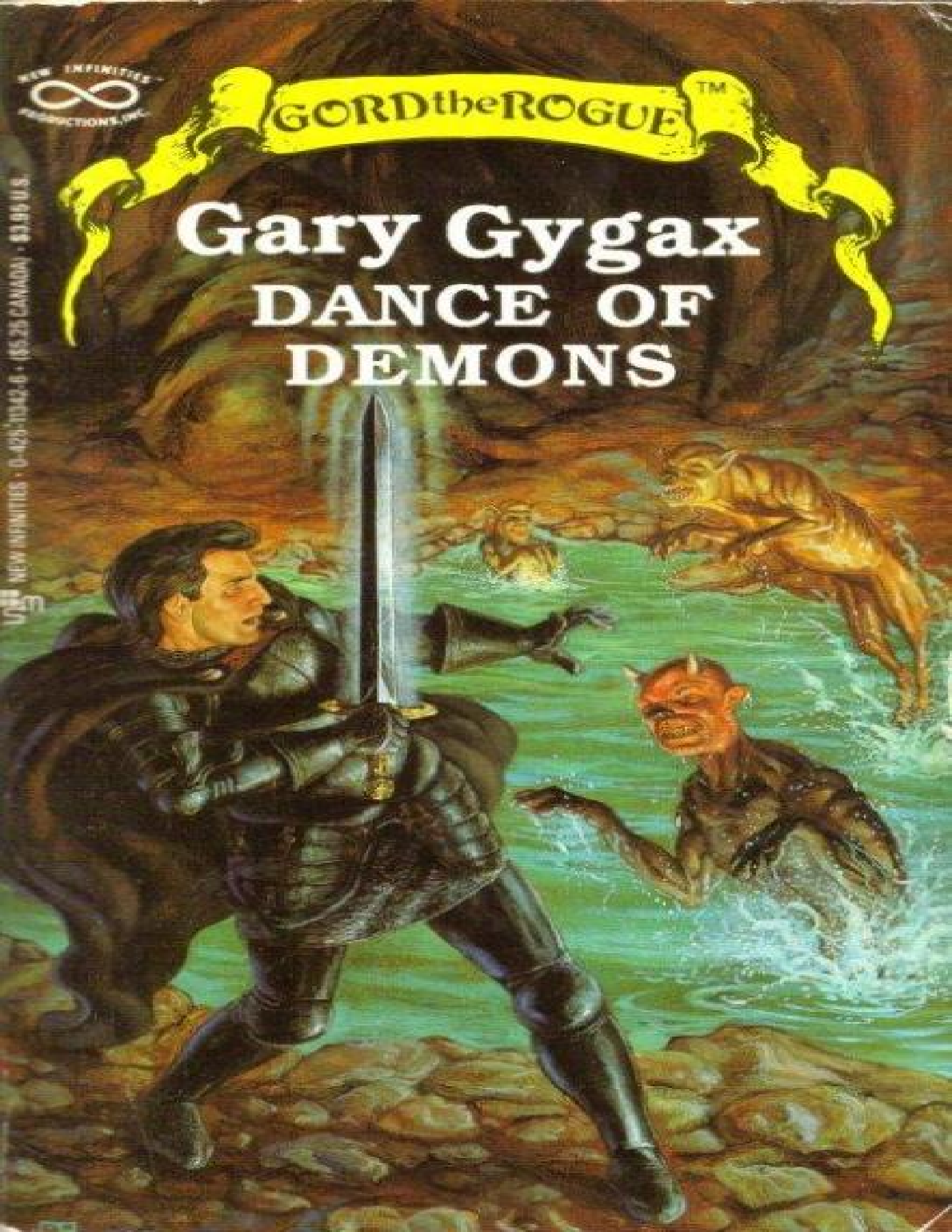
GORD the ROGUE™

Gary Gygax

DANCE OF DEMONS



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Dance of Demons

Gord the Rogue Series Finale

Gary Gygax

Chapter 1

JUDGED BY HUMAN STANDARDS, basing the assessment strictly upon physical and mental capacities, arts and skills possessed, Gord the Rogue of Greyhawk would measure high. Ever since his early years, he has been a master of disguise and impersonation. It might be that Gord was the commensurate thief in all aspects of that questionable craft. It would be judged certain that he was unparalleled as a cat-burglar, for none surpassed him as acrobat and gymnast. That Gord was a swordsman of masterful ability would be contested by none. In fact, some would Judge that he had sacrificed the status of grand master of all thieves to be a master swordsman; so perhaps there were one or two more skillful at either profession than Gord, but in no one else could be found such a combination of talents. High praise, but no more than the truth as men measure such qualities.

At the age of thirty, Gord was still young and appeared youthful — until one noticed the creases around his eyes, and the eyes themselves. Gray eyes that could be as hard as stone, as cold as the leaden seas of the north under winter sky. These were the eyes of a remorseless opponent, for they had seen suffering, torture, deceit, and death. Yet none would say that they were absolutely cruel, could not glow with comradeship, shine with happiness. Gord was as stout a friend as he was unrelenting a foe. No enemy who had stood before Gord remained alive to boast of the encounter. No comrade would say aught than that this man stood ready to lay down his life on behalf of right and friendship.

"Touché!" The cry came from a tallish, grizzled nobleman. A knightly troubador, this man plied all manner of weapons with skill, but his specialty was the longsword. Close examination revealed that one of this troubador's eyes glittered unnaturally. Under the scarred eyelid there was an orb of golden hue. No normal eyeball that, but rather a polished and enchanted stone of corundum, a golden sapphire that enabled the possessor to see through the false and illusory, to espy the hidden and view the alien dimensions otherwise closed to mortal eyes. His name was Gellor. He was Gord's closest friend.

"We are even, then, at three each," Gord shot back, parrying a stroke from the one-eyed bard as he spoke. Then he launched into a flurry of cuts,

thrusts, and feints both high and low.

Gellor saved his breath, concentrating on defense until an opening came and he could resume the offensive again for a time. He was fencing with an ordinary practice sword, just as Gord held a blunt-tipped, dull-edged brand. Thus armed, Gellor was reasonably confident that he would eventually prevail in the match, if only by the slimmest of margins. His short, gray-eyed opponent was faster than he was, but Gellor was stronger and far more experienced. An opening! "Four," he told his opponent softly, as his sword bounced off the younger man's padded legging, and he tried to press the advantage immediately as Gord had just done.

Now Gord defended himself grimly against the storm of the troubador's glittering steel, and the air reverberated with the clash and ring of their blades. Had Gellor been wielding his enchanted blade, then Gord would have been dead. At the same time, Gord knew that, armed with his own sword now called Courflamme, he would be more than a match for the one-eyed nobleman with or without any other magical weapon. "Come and get me, then, one-eye!" he taunted, using his speed and reflexes to make a steel hedge between himself and his opponent's darting and slashing blade. He watched the eye, the body's shifts, the footwork simultaneously. As he did so, Gord's mind correlated each look and move with the swordplay that followed. He was learning, practicing, and honing his skill.

"Enough?" Gellor asked after another quarterhour had passed. Both men were panting, sweat-covered. Neither had succeeded in another penetration of the other's defense.

"For now," Gord replied with a chuckle as he stepped back and put his point at rest upon the smooth strips of oak that floored the place.

Just under five and one-half feet tall, the darkhaired young man had sinewy muscles and lightning quick reflexes. Just like a panther, Gellor thought to himself. As strong as a leopard, as fast, as ferocious. Had any such cat the intelligence and reasoning ability that Gord possessed so amply, then that animal would be king of beasts and men alike. It made the grizzled veteran proud that his friend was so staunch a fighter for choice and liberty, the champion of Balance, the sworn foe of all who would oppress any other. Gellor knew that if Gord had cast his lot with Evil, then Tharizdun would be assured his reign of unyielding darkness upon all for

eternity. Instead, the young adventurer had accepted the burden of opposing the ultimate wickedness. It was only a short time now before Gord would have to face the dreaded god of all Evil. It was a confrontation that boded ill. No man, regardless of his qualities, could face such a test with even a scant ray of hope.

Granted, Gellor thought to himself, the Lords of Balance had bestowed supernatural and magical devices and powers upon their champion. That he could actually receive and maintain unique forces and abilities of this sort was indicative of his heritage, of the legacy which made Gord more than a mortal. A glimmer of hope from the supernatural energies, a glistening of chance from his heritage and his innate desire. Was it a measurable chance? One in a thousand? The newly merged sword was an unknown quantity. And Gellor himself had to be added into the equation, since he would accompany Gord. Perhaps, just perhaps, there was a real probability of success; if not, then what of the prophecy? If he had no chance of success, then why did the dark rulers of the nether spheres fear Gord's very survival, let alone his coming?

"Would money buy your musings, bard?" Gord asked, wiping beads of salty sweat from his brow.

"Mere commons, my friend, would purchase such idle queries as I have been mulling over," Gellor replied with a trace of a smile. "When do you think we will set forth?" he asked, even though he knew the answer as well as Gord did.

"When they have finished the enspellment of everything — our weapons, our other possessions, us! It is no small matter to bring about that which will enable us to stride the nether realms as Gill Plowman walks his furrows," Gord responded, breaking into a broad grin. It was no false humor, either. He and his comrade both knew what he had just articulated. Gord was japing at Gellor's nervousness and his own as well.

"Instruct your grandsire on the consumption of suet pudding, whelp!" Gellor said. "Come on! Let's bathe the stink from us and get some nourishment inside, else we'll have neither the company for our final instructions nor the strength for any undertaking."

Clapping his arm around the taller man's shoulders, Gord said, "Very well, grandpapa, and allow me to support your aged bones as we go!"

The walk was but a short one to the suite of chambers that had been reserved permanently for Gord and whatever guests he might choose. The vast expanse of the Catlord's rambling palace had no finer chambers than Gord's. Soon he and Gellor were stripped and enjoying the plash of water from the cascade that fell from the artesian-fed fountain into the tiled basin of the great pool in the inner gardencourt that Gord's suite surrounded.

Later, while his comrade was sleeping in his own rooms, and Gord was himself comfortably sprawled on a huge, feathery bed, half dozing, the young champion's mind returned to the question Gellor had voiced . . . and the ones left unspoken as well. It was plain what concerned the bard. He would accompany Gord, both despite and because of the dangers that awaited on the nether regions. Gellor would haw it that way — no question!

The grizzled troubador was brave and competent Gord could imagine no finer hero to stand at his side. Six feet tall, the one-eyed man was all hard muscle and iron determination. He had behind him years of knightly training and experience, coupled with the rigorous disciplines of the troubador — Instructions in arcane matters by the most learned savants, training at the magical playing and singing from the bard, skald, and harpist too, even lessons in the less savory arts of the minstrel and mountebank Just as Gord himself was a complex blend of professions and skills, so too Gellor. The skills and abilities of the finest knight coupled with the ethical standards of the highest chevalier formed the base of the man's character. Added to that were the experiences of serving Balance as an agent, spy, and even enforcer. Magical crafts, disguise and trickery, and the arts of thievery and diplomacy too. So as Gord was thief and swordsman, Gellor was troubador and mountebank and that combination was rare, rare indeed. It could exist only in a person totally lacking in principle, or one fully committed to a great cause.

The fabled Rhymers of the Blackfens, those northern mages who with kanteel and verse wrought world-shaking dweomers, might exceed the troubador's own ability in magic. On the other hand, it was in that land of snow and ice that Gellor had won his own kanteel and brought back great spells for his own repertoire. Gord doubted that any of the great druidic bards would care to challenge the oneeyed troubador to a contest of skill in that vein. Perhaps Gellor was as great as any man or elf, then, when it came

to the weaving of spells by music and verse. Yet, as Gord, he was but a man, for all intents and purposes.

"The very deities themselves hesitate to confront the foe," Gord murmured as he rolled into a more comfortable position, "yet Gellor and I go forth readily enough upon command. This multiverse is passing strange. . . ." Then he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Had he been awake, and had one of the deities Gord referred to been there to comment, the reason for what Gord regarded as passing strangeness might have been explained to him. There was cause for the terrible battles raging on Oerth, the wars being fought on many planets parallel to that world and existing in its universe and others. There was purpose and cause for the one champion to strive against the coming of Evil's domination to be, in most part, human. Mankind, its inherent frailties included, was the crux of the whole struggle. Whether the struggle was expressed in terms of Evil versus Good, devil versus deva, or demon versus deity, the very existence of those concepts and entities relied solely upon the existence and intellect of mankind. Of course, the term "mankind" included more than just human beings. It encompassed the little folk of faerie, whether of unseelie or seelie court, men and elves, and all other manner of humanoids, from gnome to giant. The devotion of mankind made possible the very existence of such beings as gods, empowered them to act, gave them cause for disputation and division, alignment and antithesis, glory and extinction.

Even those entities whose reliance upon the thought and energy of mankind was minimal or nonexistent found themselves desiring those forces. Understanding, appreciation, awe, dread, and the manifold other emotions that stem from the thoughts of such creatures as dwarves and men and goblins and ogres was as gold to most such beings.

One thing was certain. Balance understood its cause and purpose. It sought to maintain all, so that there would be meaning and purpose to the whole. Just as certainty, there was an entity somewhere in the multiverse which cared nothing for equilibrium. That entity disdained mankind and its power, the deities and demons and their own force. It would greet death with death; for once the grave has taken all life, death too must cease to exist in their splendid and lofty hubris, the lords of the spheres of Light refused to make common cause against Evil, and had it not been for the

willful and unruled demons, the nether realms would already have laid unending darkness on all.

Now Balance, and that only in the person of a single champion, Gord, had an opportunity to strike against the growing might of Evil. The problem was compounded by the emergence of the unknown entity that sought to destroy both Good and Evil, In the process removing the reason for and the existence of the neutral equilibrium. The small and relatively weak center of things, that called Balance, had one special advantage in the face of all its challenges. At its heart, it was the force of mankind, its perceptions and understandings those of man's thought. And perhaps, in the end, its willingness to accept any ally gave it the strength to fulfill its purpose.

Gord slept dreamlessly. No voice intruded upon his slumber. That was well and good. Soon enough he would need every resource.

Then . . ."Please join us, champion."

There was no sound. The words sprang into his mind as if spoken. It was a new sensation to Gord, and a disturbing one. "I will come in minutes," he replied mentally. There had been other such strange things in the past, disquieting additions to what he had presumed was "normal". First had been the expansion of his visual ability so that he could see in low light. That ability had grown to include vision into the lower and higher spectra, so that eventually Gord accepted the glow of heat or the radiance of some magical or aural light as normal — to him, if not to most men.

Then the young adventurer had been required to deal with the transformation of his form into that of a cat The immutable body became a thing of the past. As a hand could be closed to make a fist, then open again, or as he could crawl, creep, or walk, so too Gord came to understand his ability to be man or feline, as naturally as any body movement or activity.

Magic was the cause of these phenomena initially, and because he accepted the existence of magic, he could accept the abilities. Then, when the source of these abilities became inherent power, that too was eventually assimilated. Now the expansion of his mind to allow for nonverbal communication and other perceptions as well was disconcerting — but Gord knew that in time this would become as normal to him as the rest. He smiled, thinking of the amazement on a child's face when it first takes a step. "There are many such eventful steps in life," he mused.

Gellor was waiting for him in the broad hall that led from their wing to the chamber where the others were assembled. "Is this the awaited moment?" he asked, falling into step beside the short gray-eyed champion.

Gord shrugged and asked about something else instead of replying. "Do you now speak mind to mind?"

"No," the troubador responded with a puzzled expression. "What made you ask that?"

"Well," his friend explained. "I was wondering how you happened to be alone and waiting for me in such short order. I was just informed of the meeting, you see."

"Something awakened me, and I knew instinctively that we were needed — at least, I think I knew. . . ."

"Right," Gord replied laconically. "Welcome to the brotherhood, as they say," he added as he looked at the one-eyed man, giving him a nod in lieu of a formal bow. When his companion peered back quizzically, the dark-haired champion responded, "You haven't made a sound since I asked you about mental communication!"

"Congratulations, both of you." Another mindvoice entered the unspoken dialogue. "Now if you would stop blasting your chit-chat throughout the place, the rest of us can get on with our discussion here," the mental voice of Rexfelis added without sarcasm.

Both men looked abashed, causing a pair of strolling guards to stare after them with momentary uncertainty. Had they been strangers, or even wellknown visitors, they would have been stopped and held for questioning. Instead, the guards snapped into salute and kept their own counsel regarding the odd expressions on the faces of prince and noble hero. Those of such exalted station were simply above the understanding of others, their reasoning must have gone.

"Better that we speak aloud," Gellor said when they were out of earshot of the armed sentries.

"Much better," Gord muttered. "I hate being a child again," he added. As if understanding fully what his friend referred to, the grizzled troubador merely nodded and sighed. Gord could well understand that too, for the feeling in Gellor must be compounded due to his greater number of years.

Wondering carefully to himself about whether or not familiarity with enspellments eased the shock of such a new situation. Gord led the way into the secluded room where the leaders of the coalition representing neutrality and equilibrium held conclave.

Formalities were dispensed with. All present knew full well who was who and what particular status was due from and to each respectively. None of that mattered at this time. All of those in the council understood that if events went on unchecked, the present course would lead to their extinction as powers, perhaps extinction in literal terms as well. The chamber was packed with the greatest powers of neutrality — eighteen with actual deityhood, twice that number of quasideities and other personages. Gord and Gellor were informally greeted, and discussion began immediately. Champion and hero were at the very least regarded as peers of these great ones. Perhaps they were above all, at least for the time being.

The three Hierophants addressed Gord and Gellor initially. "You have spent the interval well, we think" they stated in unison. The multitoned chorus sounded strange to Gord's ears even after hearing them speak thus so many times. "Through the years you two have devoted yourselves to Nature, to the betterment of all," the trio went on, directing the remark more toward the troubador than Gord, despite the fact that it was the latter who was championing their cause now. That seemed to make Gellor uncomfortable, but his comrade took no notice of the preferment shown. It was, after all, natural for the speakers to defer to the elder of the pair. "Our gift of welcoming is that of the mind. Three powers each have you now — speech by thought, movement by mind of your body to any place you can imagine, and the ability to become mentally invisible so that no other mind can find yours."

"Those are generous gifts, exalted ones. Gellor and I thank you," Gord told the Hierophants as they looked first at the one-eyed bard, then directly at him.

Then came a series of other similar presentations. The affair was both a ceremony of elevation and a briefing and arming of a force being assigned to fight the enemy. The honors and powers were given to allow the two the utmost chance of success — success on behalf of the lords present and all those who opposed Evil. And there was more to it than even that. The

whole issue now included the continued existence of vitality in the multiverse.

The Shadowking gave both men shadow armor. It was seemingly insubstantial stuff, weighing nothing, interfering with no motion or act; yet the umbrate cuirass and gorget, the greaves and brassards were as impenetrable as plate of enchanted adamantite in all conditions except total darkness or glaring, shadowless light. With this armor and the other protections each of the two heroes wore — magical rings giving proof against attacks and magic spells, shirts of mail dweomered by elven wizards, and all the rest — the most puissant of devils or demons would find it near impossible to strike either man with weapons.

The savants of Oerth, represented by Mordenkainen, could give Gord nothing of benefit to him, but upon Gellor the ancient archwizard bestowed a strange musical instrument. It was a lutelike thing with many additional instruments attached to or forming part of its body. It had been recovered from some lost trove and restored by those great mages with the assistance of Heward, Lord Hugh, one who was most skilled at such things.

Rexfelis too was unable to gift anything further to the champion, but to the troubador he gave what he called "cat's paws," boots and gauntlets that had power of enabling the wearer to land on his feet, climb as a cat, and deliver clawed blows.

There was but little the druids could assist with, for where the two had to venture there was no flora or fauna of natural sort; no sun, moons, planets, or stars, not even the natural elements. Those other priests of Balance, however, could be of some help. They were the channel through which flowed to Gord and Gellor the grants of healing. Immunity from disease and parasite, knowledge of truth, and warding from foes.

Then followed various and sundry other presentments and powers, so that when the last of them were granted, neither of the two companions was quite sure just what they now were and what they could accomplish. "You are somewhat confused," the Hierarchs noted. "We understand. Although you might find it incredible, you may rest assured that we were once thus," the three chorused. "The whole will be assimilated, never fear, in due time."

"There is precious little of that," Mordenkainen snapped. "They need neither your collective anecdotes or my lecturing," he went on. "We must

get to the last part of this whole business, and then let the two of them get on with it!"

"Somewhat abrupt, dear old fellow," Keogh, Lord Thomas, said, stepping in to stand between the Hierophants and the archwizard. "I was about to get to the last part anyway, you know."

Mordenkainen made a sour face and twiddled his fingers in a "come on, then" gesture. The master of muses fumbled around inside his robe and finally brought forth a roll of parchment and a rune-worked stick of charcoal. Gord and Gellor peered at the objects, wondering what Lord Thomas was about to do. "He has discovered something at last," the old mage supplied somewhat in sarcasm, seeing their uncertainty. "Tell them! Get on with it!"

"Well," the mystic fellow said, seeming to ignore Mordenkainen with the patience an adult demonstrates with an unruly offspring, "I suppose you, Gord, and you, Gellor, are wondering just what this is all about, my little show here," Thomas spoke as he laid out scroll and stylus. "It is automatic writing, and it comes from an unexpected source. . ."

As he said that, the rime-covered charcoal stick arose, point on parchment, and began slowly to trace out a line of writing upon the pale surface.

"Basiliv here, if only in spirit. Constrained as to energy, what I can relate. Rite of shielding against dweomers follows. M can do that. Gord, beware the conclusion of all Triumph!"

There then followed a series of glyphs and other pictograms, a magical shorthand which filled the remainder of the roll.

"How did you discover this sort of communication was possible?" Gellor inquired.

"We have all been seeking Basiliv, his psyche, for a long time now. I was trying to make notes on new avenues to try when the Demiurge himself took over from me. There's no credit to me," Lord Thomas said modestly.

Gord thought otherwise but remained quiet. He was wondering just what the warning about the "conclusion of all" meant. "Will you be able to restore his spirit and form?" he finally asked the master of muses.

"Doubtful, most doubtful," Mordenkainen interjected. "Especially now that he has revealed to me one of the most potent castings of the Omni Arcana Magna. ..." He trailed off, turning to look over his shoulder at a cohort who had advanced toward the scroll.

"Aha! I suspected as much!" the archmage snapped, covering the writing on the scroll quickly. "You are not mature enough, not ready for such as this. Tenser! Return to your proper place whilst I finish instructing these heroes." He remained steadfast in the face of a glower from not only Tenser but Bigby as well, for that worthy spellcrafter had also slipped in near in order to view the writings from Basiliv.

"Upstarts!" Mordenkainen muttered, then looked at Gord and Gellor. "In a day or two I'll be ready to confer upon you that degree of magical immunity which your own force of being can maintain — possibly only a trifling bit compared to what I myself will undoubtedly be able to retain. No matter, no matter! I have much to do now, so the others can amuse you." With that, the gray-bearded archwizard turned and left the assembly without saying another word to anyone.

"Basiliv seems to be essentially lost from our ken, as it were," the three Hierophants piped. "He was perhaps the one best suited to deal with these times of tribulation, but the rest of us will make do. Unless there are questions you have, there is nothing further for you here." they observed in unison. "Our apologies for the truncated and hasty ceremonies."

"Everyone is either trailing off or abrupt," the troubador said under his breath to Gord. "My head spins and reels with all that has occurred. Anyway," he added as an afterthought, "if you have any inquiries, my friend, fire away, I am quite unable to think of anything to say."

"Thank you, thank you all," Gord said loudly. "I believe it is time Gellor and I returned to our own chambers and become familiar with all the new . . . powers ... we have received."

"An excellent idea, champion," Rexfelis announced. "I will personally escort you both." The others rose, or turned if already standing, and gave a semi-informal farewell before resuming a whispered debate, which Gord suddenly realized must have been going on for some time already. Somewhat in anticipation of the close of the ceremony, the group was already deep in discussion of what each indIvidual or society would now be

doing to try to hold things together until the degeneration of conditions could be curtailed, halted, even reversed. Some said that would require Gord's reuniting the terrible relic and the freeing of Ultimate Evil. So another immediate round of how to deal with that sprang up from the others.

Responsibility and reliance, Gord mused, placed a heavy burden upon each and every one of the lords. Rexfelis commented on that to Gord and Gellor as the three of them walked slowly along the corridor outside, saying, "Don't press the issue regarding the Demiurge, Gord. I fear we have lost him forever — at least save for such bits as you Just witnessed."

"Surely the others know this, too?"

"Yes, but it is a terrible blow, and even such as we lords of Balance need to maintain morale. Do you feel much different?" he asked, changing the subject. Rexfelis looked at the gray-eyed man who was his great-grandson and champion of the fight against darkness. Gord shook his head, his confusion clear on his face. He was torn by conflicting realizations: he was quite literally now a powerful lord, and yet he felt much the same as he had when he was a mere stripling. "Exactly. I feel much the same myself at times. The most disturbing part is that Basiliv was taken by an enemy not of the dark forces. But enough of that now! Let's have a slight repast, we three, and I will tell you a few last things you should know."

The Catlord steered his companions to a small, cozy little dining chamber where silent servants set forth a sumptuous array of delicacies on silver trays and plates, poured various liquids into flagons and decanters, and bowed before leaving as silently as they had prepared the refreshments.

"I must admit," Gellor said as he viewed the astounding variety of comestibles before him, "I am still surprised at you, my lord."

"How so, good hero?" Rexfelis rejoined lightly.

"You are king of cats, yet this is much more than cat's fare — and there's not even a solitary mouse!"

Rexfelis laughed heartily as he raised a crystal goblet and sipped the red-gold wine it held. "Thank you, noble Gellor. We need to relax from the cares which would otherwise grind us down. Know you, though, that never will either of you ever be mistaken by your peers?"

"I don't follow you, grandsire," Gord told him.

"With friends, comrades, allies, you may set aside your guards and wards in part. Here, now as we do. But if you do so, any being of power, a greater demon, a major devil, even a plane tar from the higher spheres will instantly see you for what you are."

Gellor stroked his chin in thoughtful acknowledgment. "It is a fair warning, Gord. We must always remember who we are, always be prepared to act in the face of hostility or aggression."

Rexfelis smiled. "Nicely put. Gord is our champion, but the wisdom of years cannot be done without. You, Gellor, are just the right companion for young thinking." He placed his hand upon Gord's forearm and squeezed. "We show little affection, but know that it is within — and pride, too! Would that I had years to spend instructing, counseling, being a friend. We have but scant days. Gord, mark my words and your friend's, too. You are changed, and plainly apparent as above the mortal now."

"I understand, and I have always given Gellor heed."

"Beyond that, remember that you are grown, altered, and henceforth your existence and whereabouts will be traceable," the Catlord said solemnly. "Beyond one or two places of safety, your every movement will be observable. Unless you are careful, your thinking will be noted and possibly read. With the power you now possess comes a whole host of difficulties not heretofore experienced by you."

Respectfully, Gord nodded, but then said, "Just as I learned when I played at being the unknown cat burglar, lord, I can learn quickly from instruction as well as my own experience. Please give me a little credit."

"Gord— " the troubador started to admonish.

Holding his hand up to stay that, Rexfelis interrupted. "Yes. You are right, and I am condescending toward you as if you were a cub, not champion of Balance. Do allow yourself time for introspection and meditation whenever possible. You will handle all far better then."

"That I will certainty do. We must practice much, alone and together, Gellor and I. The new strengths and abilities must be tested, gauged, and studied so that we can control them."

"I will keep my eye on him . . . perhaps even the enchanted one, lord," the troubador said only half in jest.

"So . . good! Excellent! Let's eat and drink now. There'll be no time later. This is the last opportunity we have before what is to be, at best, a long separation. There are too few such times!" And without further ado, Rexfelis set to as an example. Both men quickly followed suit.

Later, after eating much, but before finishing all that was to be drunk the Catlord observed, "From the way you demolished the viands, I have no fear when you face the enemy. If you handle demons and devils in such fashion, there will be none left!" Gord and Gellor laughed in agreement, for they had indeed fallen savagely upon the food. "Seriously, my friends, I see in you the power to send your foes flying in fear, the strength to deal with the darkest of the netherworld. That blade of yours," he said to Gord, looking him in the eyes. "Courflamme. It is the essence of our cause, and the most potent thing Balance has ever wielded. Have a care, though, for it may avail you naught against Tharizdun."

Despite drink those last words stayed in the forefront of Gord's thoughts as he went to sleep many hours later.

Chapter 2

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND and more men under arms marched through the Great Kingdom. Before these soldiers swarmed yet more thousands of vicious humanoid scouts and irregulars. The clash of steel and the tramp of hooves and iron-shod feet rang everywhere from the streets and courtyards of Rauxes, the kingdom's capital, to the far reaches of the empire.

No neighbor of the Overking's trembled, though. The Great Kingdom was torn by rebellion and internal strife. North Province and South were leagued to overthrow their monarch, while the Medegian army tore at the border marches, meaning to wrest them from the Overking while he was occupied elsewhere.

Did the other states of the eastern Flanaess rejoice, then? To the contrary — Nyrond, Almor, and the other northern neighbors of Overking Ivid were embroiled in their own disputes. Quarrels and skirmishes were rife. Open warfare loomed. So too in the south. Civil disturbances, banditry, and seafaring raiders made the lands of Sunndi, Irongate, and all the others red with fire and blood. Even the barbaric kingdoms to the far north, the Flan states, and the nomads of the west were embroiled in one form of strife or another. All of the continent of Oerik in fact, was in turmoil. At best, there was unrest; at worst, armed hosts clashed and slaughtered and wrought destruction.

This illness brought advantage to no one. not even the evil ones who sought to gain from it Whether allied to demons or devils, whether the conglomerate empire hammered together by the half-demon Iuz or the scheming forces of the Scarlet Brotherhood, the forces of Evil could garner no profit from the madness that seemed to sweep over the world. If their enemies were torn by factiousness, so too were the hosts of the netherworlds as they sought to conquer.

In the deadly game being played out on Oerth, attrition was the sole benefactor. Creatures died, fire and storm wrought havoc, famine and plague spread. As if in protest at the fighting, or perhaps in harmony with the desire for extinction, the very planet itself brought forth devastation. Freak weather, cold or hot, flood or drought, conjoined with tempests and tornadoes to decimate whole regions. Earthquakes tore gashes and leveled

cities, while old volcanoes thundered to life after centuries of slumber and new eruptions built ever larger blotches of desolation.

Even those states whose military forces gained victories found their borders contracting. With their resources, populations, and strength of government dwindling, there was no way for conquerors to maintain control. Cartographers in the court might redraw maps to show extended territories, but in actuality the writ of each prince shrank to little more than the territory which he and his soldiers happened to occupy at the moment.

With such turmoil occurring, trade withered. Land and sea commerce dwindled. With markets gone and food scarce, people began reverting to subsistence activity: find enough to eat, avoid being slain by soldiers, bandits, or monsters, and be ready to take what could be taken if the opportunity arose.

On that portion of the cosmic game board that was Oerth, the little figures remaining in play became fewer and fewer, while the squares upon which they had stood altered to show ruin and wilderness. A whole continent disappeared under the waves. The waters rose. The form of Oerik shrank, and its coastline moved inland.

All of the multiverse was afflicted to some degree. Far-removed worlds, alternates of Oerth, were in flux; star-roving beings fought with others over galactic empires; entities combated with one another over planes and dimensions unimaginable to most humans. Woe was everywhere and every when. The darkness of Evil spread to stain all, yet its minions grew no greater. Evil pervaded the cosmos, but as it spread it thinned and grew tenuous in its power.

The vast disaster brought only sorrow and death. This condition was perceived by the lords of all the warring factions, but even they could do nothing about what was occurring. At least, they could do nothing short of ceasing their warfare — and that, of course, was unthinkable. Could the bright minions of Weal ever rest until dark Evil was destroyed? Never! So too, the ordered phalanxes of Law had only one reason for existence: the extinction of Chaos's wild realms. If no advantage was to be gained, then ideology became paramount. Each infinite cause continued to struggle in its contention with that it opposed.

All losses, no gains, and the very stuff of the multiverse turned inward and began to consume itself.

At the nadir of the nether spheres, Infestix saw the dire course that was unfolding. He raved and raged and redoubled his efforts to bring the pieces of the great relic together. Reasoning that only Ultimate Evil could redress things, Infestix brought more diabolic aid to the war in the Abyss at great personal cost to himself, promising the dukes of the Hells much in return for their reinforcements. Similarly, the Master of the Pits scraped the gloomy planes of Hades for fodder, sending regiment after regiment of hordlings, daemons, and mixed bodies of dreggals and dumalduns to be slaughtered in the fight.

Although the massive influx of evil soldiery had its effect upon the tide of the war, there were repercussions. The higher spheres saw the destruction occurring on all levels of the cosmos and attributed it to the proximity of the three parts of the malign artifact. Solars, planetars, and companies of devas, unable to strike directly in the realms of demonkind, roamed the channels between the lower planes, ambushing all Evil they encountered there. The slaughter was great, and soon only the most powerful of dark beings could travel these areas; lesser devils and daemons, for example, were destroyed by the roving minions of the spheres of Good.

Although the lords of the Hells were much disturbed at this turn, Infestix himself was pleased. The troops he had already moved into the Abyss, committed to his fight against Graz'zt and the allies of the demon king, were now consigned to the fray for an indefinite period. They had no real choice; to fight there and die at the hand of others of Evil was preferable to being destroyed hideously by shining squads of devas and their even greater officers.

The arrival of Infestix's minions actually brought some relief to Graz'zt. Other demon lords who had been wavering, thinking about throwing their force against Graz'zt, resented the intrusion into their domain by outsiders. Thus, they ultimately decided to remain neutral or elected to side with the ebon demonking. The weak rulers of Pandemonium were moved to send cacodemon conscripts to the assistance of Graz'zt. The reinforcements Graz'zt had thus gained saved his horde from prompt annihilation, but he remained ringed by enemies.

The great, black-hued demon dug in and prepared for the worst. The sole portion of the relic he possessed, even along with the Eye of Deception, a mighty magical artifact of malign force, was insufficient to stave off the two parts of the key that his foes now wielded against him. Magical as well as numerical superiority meant that only time stood between the advancing enemies and their victory. Graz'zt determined to make them pay dearly, though. He conducted a brilliant defense, in large part thanks to his marshal, Vuron, and the dark elven high priestess called Eclavdra.

Then the invading force became divided. Iuz, backed by Iggwilv, the Eldest Witch, and Zuggtmoy, the demoness Queen of Fungi, demanded that his armies be the ones to march into the heart of Graz'zt's realm. When Demogorgon, Mandrillagon, and their captains objected, desiring the honor for themselves, Orcus threw in his lot with the cambion Iuz, for he was ever opposed to Demogorgon's aims. Thus the besieging host was suddenly split into contending halves, and their Theorparts, their one-third portions of the relic of all Evil, opposed each other.

Back came the regiments of the ebon king of the Abyss. With his own Theorpart now able to neutralize the forces of the contending thirds held by his enemies, Graz'zt used the Eye of Deception and a score of lesser magical objects along with his forces to crush spearheads of attackers, tear through their lines, destroy their bases, and totally disrupt their advance. Soon the legions of devils, phalanxes of dreggals, daemon and hordling divisions, and all the rest too were pushed back and nearly off the plane that was the heart of Graz'zt's empire.

"Now there is but one thing remaining," Graz'zt announced proudly to the assembled demon lords and generals of his array. "We will defeat the enemy in detail. First comes the two-headed dungheap calling itself Demogorgon. Then it will be the turn of the sprat, Iuz, my by-blow. That will be the culmination of my delight, and great will be my glee as he and his mother Iggwilv writhe in final agony under my hand!"

To counter the resurgence of Graz'zt's force, Infestix himself came to the Abyss with a deputation of the dukes of the Hells. The Netherlords of Acheron with their undead and maelvis were with him. Gehenna and Tarterus too were represented by their monarchs. By paying over objects of power, by promising and cajoling, the factious demons were reunited. Now outnumbering their encircled foe by six or better to one, and with an actual

strength of at least twice Graz'zt's own, the reforged alliance closed its iron jaws once again, advancing slowly this time. Only after the ebon king of the Abyss was finished would they again allow their differences to surface.

Such events were mirrored elsewhere. On Oerth the tide of battle swung first one way, then the other. Dark-complexioned armies from the far south marched northward into the vacuum left by hordes of nomads riding eastward. There these southerners met even more numerous hosts of golden-skinned warriors, and both forces were bloodied uselessly, the lands they fought over despoiled. The nations of the central portion of the continent became battlegrounds, just as all the rest of Oerik had been. Here, though, as if in counterpoise, the companies of darkness were being driven back. The powers of Weal ceased their bickerings and united to form an effective front against Iuz, the Scarlet Brotherhood, and the daemon-worshipping wild folk of the great steppes of the west.

During all of this. Balance strived vainly to check Evil's advance into the spheres of neutral sort and, more importantly, to convince the lords of the spheres of Light to spend their power to thwart Hades, delay Infestix, and hinder the wielding of the Theorparts. But the forces of Light refused to cooperate; only Good can bring about a good end, they reasoned, and the urgings of the lords of neutrality went unheeded. Indeed, many of those greater ones who sought Weal were convinced that Balance was actually leagued with the dark powers. How else could Evil spread and grow? they asked. Thus, no small portion of the efforts of Good were expended against the neutral position.

On the phantasmal playing board of the cosmos, the pieces belonging to Light, the pawns of white and gold and blue, took material spaces and threatened the dark regions. Yet as they were so moved, their numbers shrank and there were fewer and fewer pieces to hold the territories and planes behind them. The blood-red and deep purple forces representing the Hells and Hades gathered in the nether planes to contest with the black masses of demonium, so few were their men moving on the spheres of Oerth and its sister worlds. These dark-hued pieces too were shrinking in number, but a shadowy one of massive size and unguessable power was forming deep within their lowest citadel. Expunge the inky rebels, brush aside the puny barrier of green, and carry the prize to Hades' nadir. Then

would appear the great piece of All Evil, and it alone would be sufficient to sweep all other forces from the many-planed field.

Green forces, those pieces and pawns of Balance, were troublesome in their placement, true; but their numbers were steadily eroding, and the configuration of potent men showing were clustered impotently in an out-of-the-way corner of the multiverse. There was interference of a most annoying sort, cloudings that disrupted moves, made captures turn into exchanges, shifted squares so that key positions were suddenly compromised or shunted to less important regions. No matter, Infestix said to himself. Strike into the Abyss with all available forces. Gain the three keys. Then — ah, then! — Infestix himself would carry the great relic's portions back to his realm. He would personally unite them, and in an instant Tharizdun, Greatest of Darkness, would be loosed for all time.

What power could resist then? None. Gone would be the rebellious demon lords. Balance would be broken as rotten bones snap under the iron sole of a megadaemon warrior's armored boot With one taloned hand Tharizdun would tear down the spheres of gold, the vaults of argent, the thrones of blue. The gloom of Evil would rise upward as smoke. It would cover the heavens, darken all light, and bring all under the sole rulership of Tharizdun. Infestix, as the chief worker for the cause, would surely sit at the Blackest One's right hand. He was yielding his autonomy, but it would gain him tenfold the power, a hundred times the glory!

The master of Hades crooked a skeletal finger. "Go, fetch The Diseased Ones to this place now," he grated to the putridaemon herald who hovered nearby. "Tell them to come before me fully prepared for every exigency," Infestix added in his hollow rasp. The herald knelt, banged its bronze-helmeted, zombie-faced head upon the massive stones of the floor, then crept backward from the place until well away from the hideous throne of its monarch. Then the monstrous thing leaped to its feet and ran to carry out Infestix's commands.

To each of The Diseased Ones, the greatest of daemonkind other than Infestix himself, the putridaemon repeated the orders he had been charged with. A sense of urgency was conveyed; that, and a sense of impending triumph. These had been incuicated merely through the word and will of Infestix. The dull brain of the daemon herald was a sponge, and the eight

who were The Diseased Ones squeezed it with their own mental power and were excited by the results.

"The moment draws near!" exclaimed the first of the eight.

"The Master himself will lead us," the least of them murmured.

"Never fear," the greatest said with a mirthless smile to the eighth. "You will have your moment of significance. ..."

"Pardon, Lord, I fail to understand," the least intoned suspiciously.

"Heh, heh, heh! As the eighth, Brucilosu, it will be your honor to take the field as commander when the Master personally intervenes!"

"But if I fall against the demons? . . ."

"There is the seventh waiting behind you, of course. Heh, heh. . . ."

Nothing further was uttered as the eight servants of Infestix made their way to their lord's grim audience chamber.

Chapter 3

IT WAS A BLACK VORTEX filled with motes of disgusting colors. The motion of the bilious green, rotten gray, putrescent yellow, and livid violet glows as they whirled and mixed with a riot of ineffable motes of other hues, was sufficient to sicken the viewer. Intestines churned in nauseous counterpoint to the evolutions of those vile-colored little gleams as they surfaced and sank within the growing maelstrom. The sight of that, the terrible wrongness of it all, caused brains to ache, thoughts to turn inward in a desperate desire to escape. Wrenching gut joined wracked brain in denial of it all. Still the vortex grew, intensified, and became omnipresent. Then the sounds reached out, and with them came the indescribable odors. It was too much for any normal mind to bear.

"Is . . . this . . ."

"The Abyss? Yes. Exactly as pictured for me by the Hierophants," Gord said. With a great deal of effort, he managed to speak to Gellor without choking on the gorge that was rising in his throat.

Gellor swallowed hard and with crabbed fingers managed to pull his leather eye patch down to cover the enchanted gem that served as his left eye. "Your energy is greater than mine, Gord, or else your constitution is stronger. Either way, I can’t view the place through the ocular. Too much can be seen that way."

"Not likely, you old wolf!" Gord countered, squeezing his comrade's shoulder in a gesture of both sharing and reassurance. Gord, as the champion of Balance, had been imbued with a deep and lasting vitality from many supernatural sources. In all, however, the one-eyed troubador was his equal. Gellor too had received energies, been gifted with power, and granted strength beyond the ken of mortals. "I'd wager it's the perspective, not the prospect, which so disconcerts you."

That remark, meant in Jest but taken more seriously, gave Gellor pause. Gord obviously referred to their situation and status. Always in the past it had been the bard who knew more, discovered more, and was in charge. Gord had been like an apprentice, a wayward nephew, then almost a protege. Now the roles were reversed, and Gellor accompanied his young friend as a lieutenant. Gord shared information, but there were certain things Gellor was not privy to, despite that. That circumstance existed

because of the responsibility the young man bore, and because Gord must bear it, not because Gord desired to surpass his friend or to dominate him. "Perhaps you do see things better than I," Gellor finally said as the spinning vortex loomed to fill the whole of their universe. "I am unused to reliance on another, albeit even a minor dependence and from a bosom companion."

"This is a fearsome thing we do," Gord said. "Who can feel anything but dread when confronting the mouth of the Abyss?"

"It is like no other plane," Gellor said with a choked voice. "You have walked in Shadow, dwelled on the sphere of the Catlord, and sojourned in aether and astrality; but this . . ."

"Don't forget I've brushed the interlinked planes of the elements, Gellor — even seen the fuicrum of positive and negative, sailed upon the vast Ocean of Thought."

The grizzled troubador nodded vigorously at that. "None of which could have prepared you for . . . this!" he nearly shouted, waving wildly to indicate the now all-encompassing expanse of the first tier of the chaotic evil sphere known as the Abyss, the realm of all demonkind. "I have in my time had to deal with the charnel vistas of Acheron, and seek certain objects in the riotous horror of Pandemonium. Not even those places prepared me for what we now must face!"

"Face? More than that, dear friend, more! We are to enter, traverse, and make this place our own,"

Gord said with a grim smile.

* * *

After being armed, armored, and equipped with all that the masters of neutrality could provide, he and the bard had simultaneously touched the intricately worked buckles of their girdles. Each buckle was imbued with those dweomers that enabled the two to traverse the infinity of places that constitutes the cosmos, the endless spheres of the multiverse. Each device was rune-worked, sigil-covered, studded, and bore a spiderweb tracery of marks in strange and rare metals. A touch and a thought; then Gord and Gellor were no longer in the realm of Rexfelis, master of all felines. One moment there was the assembly of the Lords of Balance; the next instant, Gord and his companion were elsewhere.

In the pearlescent twilight of the Aethereal Plane, Gord and Gellor fairly glowed with the strength of their internal powers, while the many magical items each bore radiated intense auras of their own. When Gellor remarked on the rather obvious locating and identifying effect coming from this emanation of dweomer, that caused Gord to consider cloaking both of them. By merely concentrating on his own amulet, a device that screened its wearer from magical locating and spying, the young champion was able to determine what needed to be done. By mentally weaving a screen of force to close in the radiations, by bending some forces and by altering others, he was able to dim the aura around them.

"How's that?" Gord had asked his companion as the two strode along the glowing gray path that their senses interpreted for them as the environment of the place. In truth, human senses, even many supernatural ones, could not properly interpret the aethereal realm as it was in actuality.

"Better," Gellor replied as he stopped and gazed first at the young thief, then at himself. "Less than beacons, now, we two, but bright still. I think we will bring attention to ourselves despite your best efforts, Gord."

Gellor's young companion shook his dark head. "Normally I would agree with you, but look at the distortion just in the near distance. See the paling of colors? The dimming of light?"

"Yes," Gellor admitted, having studied all that surrounded them for the space of many heartbeats. "There is something wrong. ..."

Gord shrugged. "Wrong? Perhaps, perhaps not. But there is something unnatural to this plane. It seems to screen us from it — it from us, too. Were Basiliv extant in the world I'd think he had managed it, but with the Demiurge passed elsewhere, I think we are being cloaked by another agency."

"So which force aids us?" Gellor asked uncertainly.

"The one of Entropy," Gord replied flatly. "And I don't believe that one interposes for our real benefit."

"So?"

"So we forge onward," the champion of neutrality said, shooting the troubador a hard smile. "I plan nothing good for such a thing as it is, either; that makes us even . . . once the greatest of evils is dealt with!"

Gellor shook his head, wondering if Gord was suddenly overcome with a hubris brought on by the infusion of power he had been granted. Yet he said nothing further and followed Gord's lead. There were whorls and streamers of various hues evident in the milky nebulousness of the aether. Where these colors were most intense they went, passing through the fringes of the elemental spheres to gain the manifold branches and loops of the Plane of Probability. In all time and none at all the two heroes traversed the elemental planes and probability's sphere and could thus pass onto the astral realm. It was as if they suddenly stepped into the center of an infinite bubble. There was nothing supporting them, yet their feet were firmly planted. Above them the cosmos grew bright and brilliant, while beneath their armored feet spread gloom of somber and ugly hues. Gellor gestured toward a well of inky darkness.

The Abyss," Gord agreed. "Let us hurry."

* * *

That is how the pair came to the insanity-provoking maelstrom that now surrounded them, moments before Gord had said they had to face and conquer the many strata of the realm of demonkind. When he heard his friend speak thus, Gellor commented, "No two can ever subjugate such a madness as this place, Gord. Not if we had every atom of energy of every deify opposed to the demons!"

That's no more than the simple truth," the young thief agreed with a smile of encouragement. "When I said we must make this place our own I meant we would venture through it, dispossess those opposed to our purposes, and bend the others to our will. Never would any but those of netherspawn dream of actually possessing this vile agglomeration of forsaken planes!"

The grizzled bard had to chuckle at that "Thinking aloud, as it were, has definite disadvantages now that both of us employ mind speech, mind search. Instant thoughts allow no modification through reflection in the course of articulation of the basic ideas. We are both being too literal, too serious."

"I get your point. This is a serious business, yet we must keep our good humor, uplifted spirit, the sense of true reality in the multiverse. If we dwell too much on the abyssal realms, both of us will surely lose perspective — even sanity."

That and more," Gellor agreed telepathically. "So what do we face here in the vestibule of demons?"

"I see this area as a no-demon's-land, more or less," Gord told the troubador aloud. He needed to hear the sound of his own voice to bring himself firmly into the reality of the Abyss as a mere portion of an infinite series of places, states, conditions and energies. "It is the common entry point to the hundreds of realms which are below, a wilderness of lurking monstrosities and roving packs of outcasts. This first tier is a place where not even the weakest of demonlings dwell; instead, it is the habitat of terrible things which guard the deeper spheres."

At that the bard turned up the leather covering of his gem-faceted ocular, viewing the surroundings carefully as if wishing to confirm his companion's words. "Faugh!" Gellor said after completing his survey. "This is a disgusting place. What can live in it?"

"Many things, methinks," Gord replied slowly, gazing off beyond Gellor's right shoulder. "In fact, here comes a welcoming party now!"

The pack that approached was indeed no puny force of scavengers vomited up from below. The demon-beasts were elephantine in size, and their aspect was a nightmare phantasmagoria. As soon as Gellor turned to view their approach, the monsters sensed discovery and rushed at the two companions in a thundering charge. Bellows, hoots, and screams of hunger, blood lust, and cruel anticipation accompanied the mad stampede.

As the bulking demon-beasts rushed toward the intruders, the bard had time to notice that there were many smaller, shadowy shapes alongside and behind the herd. Hippo-bodied things with snake necks and beaked heads lumbered alongside bearlike and mastodonian demons with equally incongruous appendages. Smaller but no less ferocious ones accompanied the great beasts, evidently planning to share in the feasting after the gigantic monsters had done the work. All that for two small people. Here brawn evidently ruled over brain.

Gellor brought forth his ivory kanteel, adjusted one of the golden pegs, and gently stroked the silver strings of the little harp. A ripple of beautiful notes washed outward, and the demon-beasts reacted as if they had been struck by a tldal wave.

When the sounds from the enchanted strings of the instrument struck, fully a dozen of the massive monsters were bowled over, while a half-hundred of the lesser scavengers were blown away, some actually torn to pieces in the process. Gord saw that, noting that already fresh bands of these creatures were being attracted to the scene by what was occurring. Down and wounded horrors were being torn and devoured by those of their fellows not so disabled.

Courflamme seemed to spring from its scabbard as the young champion drew the sword's glittering blade to confront the onrush. Somehow Gord knew that this was the correct thing to do, even though the marvelous weapon seemed a minuscule defense in the face of such an attack. The pommel of Courflamme flashed heat, then chill to his hand, and the whole sword shimmered and pulsed.

As this occurred the blade sundered itself into two portions. Gord held a bright band of silvery hue with an ebon-flamed core while its counterpart, a sword of Jet with a coruscating heart of diamond radiance, sprang forth to hover before him.

Gord knew instinctively what he had to do. "Go!" he said aloud to the dark blade as if it were a living entity. "Seek the demons out — spare none!" As he uttered that command, Gord willed the weapon to arrow toward the monstrous pack that still came ahead. Many of the demon-beasts had escaped the effects of the kanteel's music, and these things still thundered on, bent on devouring him and his companion.

The sable-hued sword sped out as if it were a bolt. Straight through the leading behemoth it shot, passing through the demon-beast from front to rear. The thing shrieked in agony at the passage, gouts of gore fountained from it, and it collapsed into putrid jelly an instant later. That was hardly the end of it, however. The long blade arced and spun in the foul atmosphere of the uppermost layer of the Abyss as if it were a faicon after a flock of doves. Back it came, sliced through a saurian neck chopped tree-trunk legs from under another of the chimerical demons, gutted a fourth, lopped the outstretched pincers of a fifth — all in the space of as many heartbeats.

Gellor found it difficult to play his ivory harp. After the initial chords had been struck, the kanteel seemed to turn and twist as if it wished to escape his fingers. The troubador knew it was the evil of the nethersphere resisting

the music, not the magical instrument. Bringing forth power from within, Gellor controlled it by building a mental image of the little harp held steadily. He pictured his hands grasping it firmly yet gently, and then thought of his long fingers touching its silvern strings. The forces bent on preventing its playing were pushed back dispelled. With a grim look of satisfaction at the success he had thus achieved, Gellor placed his fingertips upon the row of argent wires and once again sent out the sweet, ascending ripples of sound from the kanteel. Predatory demons a mile distant turned away from the wash of music he brought forth.

Initially Gord had concentrated on the ebon twin of the bright blade he clasped in his right hand. Its attacks upon the pack of great demon-beasts had been envisioned by him, and the sword seemed to respond as if it were an extension of the young champion's will. The herd of ringing lesser monstrosities no longer surrounded the two men. Those nearer to Gellor had been slain, wounded, or driven off by the music the bard brought forth from his magical harp. Before Gord, though, there was still a horde of howling horrors, and three or four of the towering demon-beasts were nearly upon him. Letting the dark brand do its work as it would, Gord prepared to face the onslaught with the shining portion he still held.

A leering thing with a froglike mouth splitting its wolverine head was almost upon the young champion. Despite its porcine body and flipper legs, the monster moved fast. Gord raised the diamond-bright part of Courflamme, aiming at the demon's outthrust head. The sword's tip suddenly spat forth a black bolt of force. The crackling ebon dart sheared off the top of the fiend's head, and the impact of it actually flipped the demon's massive body over in a somersault.

Without pausing to view his work Gord turned and faced his next foe, now aiming the long blade as if it were a wand. Again the inky core of the weapon sent forth a blast of dark power, and another of the charging demons died. It became almost mechanical thereafter Gord pointed the blade, willed destruction. and another monstrous beast crashed down dead. Again, again, yet again. Soon a half-circle of twitching demon corpses formed a barrier in front of him, a wall so great that the young champion could see nothing but its stinking height.

In desperation, Gord moved backward, readying for yet more of the terrible things to come pouring over the barrier of corpses. "I'll blast you

all!" he shouted defiantly, cutting a semicircle in the air before him with the bright blade. The gesture brought a withering geyser of soot-tongued flame from the sword's crystal tip, and the inferno of black fire disintegrated the reeking pile of demon-flesh. A dozen of the smaller beasts, busy feeding on the bodies of their larger kin, were caught by the torrent of destruction and likewise made into corpses. A handful of the massive fiends, the slowest of the pack, suddenly floundered to a halt at the sight of what had occurred. Even such minuscule brains as theirs could discern the fate that awaited, should they come closer to the small man who had seemed such easy prey. They flopped and rolled and turned, seeking escape.

Gord didn't allow that. Even as his comrade sent forth fresh ripples of sweet sound to play havoc among those demons who still opposed the troubador, Gord leaped through the breach in the massive wall of dead fiends, and with arm outstretched brought his blade into play again. It was as if he were skewering tied fowls. Black radiance sped from Courflamme's point, and a lumbering thing convulsed in its death agony. Another elephantine demon shot yards into the air as the burning ebon force struck and slew it. Foul thing after even more disgusting one yammered and went into nothingness as the weapon sent its destruction through each in turn. Straight as arrows the bolts of force sped, well beyond the range of the best bows. In minutes not a single living demon was anywhere in sight before Gord. Then the young man turned to see how Gellor was faring.

A rippling peal of harmony greeted Gord's turning. "Most impressive, my young friend," Gellor told him with a second little run of the kanteel's silver strings as an accent to the compliment. "My little harp sent the demons tumbling and breaking well enough — but that blade of yours spits out magical bolts as if it were Cabbac's own Baton of Blazes."

"Not an impossible inspiration, Gellor. After all, the Uncaring One is of neutral disposition," Gord said dryly. Both men chuckled, for they knew that the god of all magics was indeed uninterested in affairs of any sort except those that pertained directly to dweomers and their spinning. Cabbac did not prevent his lieutenant from siding with Balance, but the father of magics himself remained purposely unaware, aloof. "Seriously, though, I do think that one of the Twelve Great Magicks of Cabbac was set within the sword."

"Quite possible," Gellor concurred as he eyed the desolate, dun landscape that stretched into infinity around them. Leprous ochre growths and lIvid gashes of terra cotta were the only relief to the dull, decayed brown that colored this part of the plane. "Ugh!" the troubador added, noticing the ground that squished under his feet for the first time since the two had trod upon this tier of the Abyss. "Nothing in this place is right or clean!"

"A bit cleaner now, with those heaps of offal manuring the ground." Gord quipped, spitting at the corpse of the nearest demon.

"Shit to shit," Gellor agreed. "But where to next?"

"We jump from this place to the buttes off there," the young champion told the bard. In the vast distance there were several tall, flat-topped hills rising like uicers from the mud-colored terrain. "The entrance to the next spheres lies there."

Gellor didn't bother to ask his comrade how he knew that. The information was simply in Gord's brain. "Need we progress from first to second, second to third, and so on?" the troubador inquired, dread evident in his tone.

"Nay. Whatever levels of this cesspool we can bypass, we will," Gord told his friend. "We need not prove anything, accomplish anything, save reach that place where Graz'zt and his allies wage war with the throng of demonkind who side with Iuz. From the central portals, we can step onto any one of a score of these spheres," Gord said reflectively. "I think, though, that we must opt to pass to the eighth plane next, and from thence make our way slantwise through several of the interposing levels, to reach the midrealms as quickly as possible."

"Then why not pass directly to the lowest tier we can attain from the central gates? There, I perceive, is a portal which enters the three hundred third of the spheres of demonkind."

"Think on that again, Gellor," Gord said as if instructing a pupil. "Does your mind note anything unusual about the plan?"

The bard concentrated a moment, then nodded curtly. "Right. I sense a clot of evil blocking that path."

"You sense right, Gellor," Gord confirmed. "I felt it immediately. Infestix and his rotting lieutenants are gathered there. He has gathered with him a

legion of daemonkind, along with sundry demons and other scum of the netherplanes to greet us. His decayed brain labors for naught, and by my route we sidestep his trap and foil the ambush with ease."

Although Gellor didn't mind playing a secondary role to the Champion of Balance, the one-eyed hero was by no means along merely to serve as a ready sword. His own mind was at work on the problem, too. "A sly demon spy reports our slaughter here to the Lord of Death even now, Gord," he told the young thief. "Infestix will soon enough note our route and send forth his fastest companies to block the way. From the eighth tier let us go directly to the Soulless Sounding., .

"Bold, very bold. Yet I think you are wiser than I, my old friend. It is a dangerous and demanding way, but one which only the lords of the Abyss can normally manage. No being less than a netherlord can survive its passage. It will take us longer, prove more perilous, but allow us the greater chance of swift and sure arrival when all things are taken into account. Let us go there, then!"

Side by side, the two heroes strode across the endless leagues of the foul layer that was the entry to the Abyss. In a short time, thanks to their innate force, they came to the lowering bluffs that housed the gateways to the next twenty tiers of the agglomeration of planes that formed the depth of evil called demonrealm, the Abyss. A few hundred lesser demons were there to contest their entry, prevent them from going on; but those malign guards died in vain, swiftly and without great effort from the pair. A clear and bright melody from the kanteel, some dark and deadly lightnings from the rejoined sword, Courflamme, and none stood to oppose them.

Bottomless pit, toothed maw, steely sphincter, raging cauldron of lava, grinding millstone, and more. Each such obstacle disguised a means of entry to another of the many tiers beneath the first With a sharp prod from his sword, Gord caused the metallic sphincter to open, for it warded the way to the eighth sphere. "Quickly now, Gellor," he told the bard. "As soon as we arrive below, we must make for the Soulless Sounding with all speed!"

Gellor shook his head in assent, leaped through the opening, and vanished. Gord followed. The razoredged circle snapped closed, but it was too late. Champion and hero now stood upon demonkind's eighth tier.

Chapter 4

A SWARM OF DUMALDUN skirmishers covered the field, their numbers and power obscuring all behind them. The tall, bounding dumaldun with their bristlecovered bodies and grinning, opossum heads seemed to be everywhere, discharging volleys of frozen-acid javelins, bringing forth clouds of poisonous, cloaking vapors, capering and daring the serried ranks of opposing demons to come forth and fight with them. The long line wavered.

"Stand fast there!" The command came from Vuron himself as the thin, white demon lord paced along behind the triple rank of mixed demon soldiery. "If any breaks formation, I will personally skin him inch by inch!" The troops heard and believed. Squat gila-monster demons, the fesroo type, braced as they stood with saw-edged glaives in the forefront of the horde. Immediately behind these reptilian demons Vuron had placed a like number of wulox, tall, thin creatures with storklike heads and spindly arms. Thin as those appendages might be, the albino general knew that the wulox could wield their needle-tined military forks well enough on any foe that managed to slip between the jagged blades used by the fesroo. In the third rank stood a mixed grouping of yet larger and more ferocious demons — goat-horned klebguzig with both pincers and fauchard-like mancatchers ready, tiny-winged gashnulfu whose pig eyes glittered as brightly as their pole axes, and even a few bat-faced raloogs, whose spiked flails and terrible swords would exact much from the enemy when the time came.

The first rank was held in place by the press of the bigger, fiercer second. In turn, the middle was kept still by the terrible third row of great demons who stood behind them, waiting. Behind all of them paced Vuron and his captains, the latter down to a handful now. Vastyi, the Master Toad, was there, still staying because of his hatred for Iuz. Palvlag too remained steadfast, and thus so did the company of raloogs, flame-demons whose might was feared by all lesser demonkind.

Hunched Nergel was at hand as well. Fear kept him allied with Graz'zt's viceroy, Vuron — fear of what the enemy would do to him even if Nergel abandoned the six-fingered king of the Abyss. Nergel had prosecuted the war too well by half ever to regain favor with Iuz, Orcus, and the rest, and after wreaking havoc in Mandrillagon's own palace, and kidnapping all of

the demon prince's harem, there could never be peace with Demogorgon's faction either. Holding the line were Vuron, the three captains, and one other thing. The albino general in charge of Graz'zt's last horde also possessed the final third of the mightiest relic of Evil ever forged.

"Send out our own velites to disrupt those turds!" The urging came from the sharp-curved chest of Nergel as the crooked demon viewed the antics of the enemy skirmishers.

Vuron restrained the remark that sprang to mind. Instead, he pointed off to the side, at a scattering of cowering dretch and rutterkin. Those pitiful few were all that remained of the thousands which had filled the light corps at the beginning of the campaign. "Do you think they will serve?" the albino asked Nergel sweetly.

Nergel either ignored or missed the sarcasm. "What matter. Lord General? Their deaths will serve well enough."

"Yes, I suppose so," Vuron admitted. There was no way either force could use height to spy out the other side's position and movements. The ground was board-flat, and no demon taking to the air would survive more than a second or two. Hundreds of missiles, a score of dweomers were all ready for just such targets. If even a small break in the screening swarm of dumalduns could be made, it might be enough to allow Vuron a glimpse of the foe. "Find a squad of boorixtroi to drive them forth," the albino told Nergel, "and make the drivers themselves stay in the fight for as long as you can."

Nergel bowed and hastened off to comply. He loved to see death — any save his own. The hunched demon likewise hated the misshapen boorixtroi, for they reminded him too much of himself. The massive, stupid things with their disproportionately long right arms and shark-toothed, lipless mouths were too disgusting even for the likes of Kostchichie. Thus, the shuffle-footed giants were relegated to police work as it were.

If this tactic worked, Nergel would get most of the credit; that he'd see to. A failure could be laid squarely upon the pale head of Vuron. Either way would bring Nergel closer to Graz'zt's favor. He located a whole section of boorixtroi lounging out of sight behind the baggage train. "Up!" Nergel shouted, and the misshapen giants scrambled erect. "Come!" he ordered,

and the dozen-plus things pounded clubbed feet upon stone-hard ground as they ran to obey the demon lord.

Just as he was about to send the boorixtroi and their whining charges out on a sweep around the right flank, however, Nergel was interrupted.

"Stop. You must wait a moment. Lord Nergel." The soft yet piercing order came from a dark elf. It was the beautiful Eclavdra, once high priestess of those who served Graz'zt on the material sphere known as Oerth, now the ebon demon king's vizier and lieutenant general of this force.

Sputtering, Nergel shot back, "Why so? This is impossible! Lord Vuron himself commanded my actions! I will proceed!"

"Be it on your . . . shoulders, then," the dark elven female replied to the outburst. She had hesitated, then chosen the word "shoulders" carefully. Nergel was very touchy about his deformed bones there. Eclavdra saw the great demon noble's face become suffused with anger, his slablike cheeks grow lIvid, and his wattles quiver. Then she spoke softly again. "You see, I have Just spoken with General Vuron, and he sent me here to make certain you did not send forth the velites quite yet."

"You lie, bitch!" Nergel spat, then regretted it instantly. "No ... I am overwrought. Lady Eclavdra — forgive the hasty words," the hunched demon managed, almost choking on his own speech. "Of course I believe you . . . but let us go to our leader immediately to settle the discrepancy."

"Discrepancy? I find no discrepancy, captain. I gave you an order; you will carry it out to the letter."

Without a word Nergel swept past the drow, his uneven gait nearly a trot as he hastened off to find Vuron. Eclavdra followed serenely after the hobblehopping lord of the Abyss, a bland smile masking her lovely features so that no observer could read her emotions.

"She . . . she prevented me from following your instructions, Vuron!" Nergel finally managed to blurt when he found the albino near the center of the array.

Vuron looked first at the dark elf, then down at Nergel. "Yes? So then, how did she countermand my orders?"

This time the hunched demonlord noticed the emphasis on the word as it spat from Vuron's hard mouth. "Time works against us, General, so I hastened to obey your . . . order . . . exactly as you commanded. In fact, I managed to locate twice the expected number of boorixtroi, too! Just as I was going to send them sweeping out to roll up the flank of the enemy harassers, that bi— er. . . the lady general, said you had personally sent her to stop the attack!"

Vuron cocked a red-pink eye toward Eclavdra.

"My pardon. Lord Nergel, but I didn't say not to attack. I ordered you only to postpone the move," she concluded, looking squarely at the misshapen demon.

Before Nergel could counter, Vuron spoke. "As my second in command, Eclavdra has full authority to do as she did. Let us leave it at that, dear Nergel. Now please return to your position and make certain all is in readiness for the surprise attack on the enemy skirmishers. It will come soon, very soon."

Mollified at the soothing tone and respectful phrasing, the malformed demon lord hobbled off with only a single poisonous glare toward the dark elven priestess. Once he was out of earshot, Vuron asked, "What is this, Leda?"

By using that name for her, the beautiful little drow female knew that Vuron was asking for absolute sincerity and truth. Both commodities were as scarce as devas in the planes of the Abyss. Leda was her true name, at least as true as any name could be for a clone grown from another — in this case, one named Eclavdra.

Although she had sprung from a dark elf at least as evil and malign as any demon, Leda had been tempered by certain influences, ideologies, and deeds. Now, although she was not of demonkind, nor did she desire Evil, Leda served the demon king Graz'zt because it was the only hope she had that the forces of darkness would not wash over everything and extinguish Good forever. Similarly, despite his being a demon lord, Graz'zt's chief advisor and staunchest servitor, and moreover a believer in all that was evil, the dark elf trusted and had respect for the albino. Vuron's great intellect comprehended far more of the multiverse than any other demon's. That tempered his demonism, modified his thinking and actions. "I exaggerated,

my Lord, in order to assure that the stroke you wished was made a telling one," she explained.

"Go on. . ."

"Our king has sent me to you with reinforcements,

Vuron," Leda said with a note of encouragement in her voice. "Graz'zt knows that you face certain defeat from overwhelming numbers. When I gave him your intelligence, the full enumeration of the great hordes closing in on us here, he was furious at first; then he calmed down. Graz'zt vented his wrath on the idlers around his throne, though, and they, in turn, managed quite suddenly to produce fresh regiments of troops!"

"How many?" the albino general asked without any apparent emotion.

"A full regiment of the bar-lguras, my Lord. Dribs and drabs of babau-ogres, nikomars and ssilhex — about a regiment altogether. There are also two more regiments of fesroo coming soon, and four troops of chasme with them as support."

"Is that the whole?"

"Yes, Vuron."

"Too little far, far too little! Did you bring the lot?"

Leda shook her long, platlnum-hued hair in negation. "Only the bar-lguras and the mixed force of babau, nikomars, and ssilhex," she said slowly. She knew all too well that this was probably a useless token in the face of the horde of enemies who opposed them. Yet there was a scant hope. "The two regiments might be sufficient to trick the foe," she ventured.

"How so?" Vuron demanded.

"Prick the vile dumalduns as you were intent on. That will probably only serve to draw forth cacodaemon reinforcements. When they come, though, you will surprise them by a hook from the other flank by the two regiments of fresh soldiers. The sight of them should make the enemy commanders think we are staging a full-scale counterattack— "

"Yes, yes!" Vuron finished the thought for her. "Mandrillagon will panic and wish to withdraw. Demogorgon, however, will countermand that and instead send his whole mass forward, hoping to catch us and finish the matter in one decisive encounter. What then . . . ? Of course! The troops we

use to screen our position will roll away to the left again, form a wing to counter any flanking moves made by the ape-heads. Every other demon I can round up will do the same on the right — the skirmishers, boorixtroi, and whatever else comes to hand. With the Theorpart, I hold the center. The enemy drives itself onto our pikes, and they die there!"

"It is much as I had thought," Leda said without any hint of taking credit.

Vuron nodded and went on. "But it is by no means a sure thing, and to truly succeed I will need the rest of the reinforcements as a reserve — and possibly a pursuit force. When will the fesroo and troops of chasme arrive?"

"They march through Jahklout," Leda told the albino commander, naming a minor layer that abutted the one they fought on. "There they will pick up the greatflys, the chasme. Yeenoghu promised to do his best to furnish a division of gholes with hyaenadons war-trained too, to be there also. I trust that not. In any event, the remainder will not be at hand for some length of time — three days, perhaps, as we drow measure time."

Vuron actually smiled at that. "No matter," he said with assurance. "Time can be subtly altered with this," he told Leda, displaying the twisted distortion that was the Theorpart. "I will employ Tharizdun's own tool against those who seek to free him. With this," he said, shaking the fraction of the relic, "I will bend time so that as seconds march away here, hours will parade past elsewhere — including Jahklout!"

Leda was uncertain. "But the enemy too possesses a Theorpart — two are against us, in fact, though only one here opposing us. Won't the time distortion be discovered? Countered?"

"Of course! It is most gratifying to see your powers of reasoning at work Graz'zt is well served by you, Leda. Still, he does not tell you all. I have the Eye of Deception here, too! If the enemy discovered that, Iuz and his scum would attack immediately, but the transfer was masked and a false aura remains opposing the cambion," Vuron explained. "Once we employ it here, it will be necessary to get it back to our liege quickly, but we have a brief advantage."

"You will use it to make your time distortion appear to be the opposite?"

"Yes, Leda. Even a Theorpart is not so powerful as to make time drag with halting step in a large area while it races elsewhere. Two portions of

the arcane relic, though, are sufficient to accomplish that. As you use the Eye to falsify the effect, I will see to it that Demogorgon joins us in our scheme to hasten the arrival of our reinforcements." As he spoke that, the tall albino demon actually tittered. The image of the terrible Demogorgon unwittingly aiding in his own defeat was sufficient to cause such mirth even if the situation Vuron faced otherwise was bleak at best.

The dark elf felt no joy. "Give me the Eye of Deception, please, and let us begin at once. The swarm of enemy skirmishers masking the front surely presages some attack soon. There is no time to waste."

The demon lord cut his laughter short and composed himself with a visible effort. The strain of the long war was evidently beginning to tell on Vuron. "You are abrupt, drow," he almost snarled, "but correct. Here," Vuron said, drawing forth a leather case from inside his cloak Opening the box, the albino demon drew out a silken bag embroidered with sigils of fiery color. The thread was of orichaicum, and the shapes moved as if they were alive. "The Eye of Deception is within. Bring it forth and mask my channeling of dweomer when I raise my left hand, not before."

* * *

Far removed, Iuz and his cohorts wondered why Demogorgon and his allies from Hades and the other netherspheres were so dilatory in pressing their advantage. Graz'zt fought a war on two fronts. With Iuz was his mother, Iggwilv, greatest of witches, and an array of mighty demons, including Zuggtmoy, the cambion's nominal consort and the queen of all fungoid demons. The roster of powerful allies continued: Orcus, Szhublox, Eblls, Azazael, Bulumuz, Lugush, Marduk, Socoth-benothas, Var-Az-Hloo, Abraxas, and a score of lesser demon nobles too. With such a force confronting the would-be ruler of all the Abyss on one front, Graz'zt had shifted the vast majority of his forces to oppose them. That should have allowed the horde of Demogorgon to advance swiftly to threaten the great ebon demonking on the other front. Iggwilv had counseled that strategy, and Iuz had agreed.

As the one front crumbled, Graz'zt would have to shift soldiers there to bolster it. Demogorgon and Mandrillagon would then demand more reinforcements from Infestix. Devils, cacodaemons, dreggals, daemons, maelvis, and dumalduns in their tens of thousands would be poured into the

attack by the master of the pits. Infestix would not allow his puppet demons to be checked, his plan to be thwarted.

As the forces led by the ape-headed Demogorgon and Mandrillagon swelled, Graz'zt would be forced to deploy still more of his own remaining strength to oppose them. Because the ebon demonking's territory was contracting, he would have fewer and fewer reserves. Quickly enough the pressure would be sufficient to cause a weakening of the line which opposed Iuz's own faction. Then, with a massive onslaught, all of the cambion's troops would attack. Graz'zt would be struck along the entire front, his defenses shattered at a blow, and his last stronghold would fall into Iuz's hands as if it were a ripe plum. But in order for that to occur, the reluctant Demogorgon had to begin pressure on the other side.

Could Infestix have realized the plan? Possible, but not likely. Even if the daemon had, his dedication to the cause of freeing Tharizdun demanded a continuing war upon Graz'zt, for the black lord of demons possessed one of the Theorparts necessary for Tharizdun's release, just as Iuz did. Naturally, Infestix thought to gam the one possessed by Graz'zt first, then to use two of the portions of the relic to defeat Iuz and his growing force of demons.

It would not occur that way. Never. Iuz would wrest the artifact turn the tables, and drive the invading enemy from the Abyss. Tharizdun would never be loosed, and Iuz would rule many places, including the Abyss and Oerth, too. Five days of inactivity . . . What was the stupid fool Demogorgon doing? Then the scryers saw the other force opposing Graz'zt begin to move and brought the good news to the cambion.

* * *

"It is working?"

"Of course it is," Vuron responded without breaking his concentration on the time distortion he was building. Leda, meanwhile, was using the Eye of Deception — once the most potent artifact in the Abyss, now but a poor fourth to the three parts of the relic that could loose the ultimate entity of Evil, Tharizdun. With the Eye, the dark elf made Vuron's act appear to be hastening time on this battle plane. Leda did this openly, but not obviously. The opposing demon nobles would sense something amiss immediately, then move to discover and counter whatever their foe was doing. One

minute of time to Vuron and her and all the others confronting each other was an hour elsewhere.

"I feel Demogorgon," the albino demon lord hissed. "Rash ... he is as rash as we had hopedl Now he perceives we are tinkering with time. He finds it fast. He thinks we will use the distortion to some advantage, so he uses his Theorpart to slow it again, to balance our effort, nullify it."

"And . . . ?" Leda whispered, unsure of the success.

"In the second it took you to ask girl." the pale demon lord replied, "an hour passed in the other layers of the Abyss. The fool has multiplied our work.

One Theorpart slows time by a factor of sixty, so that a second passes as a minute, a minute an hour. Two multiply that again, and one second is now one hour!"

"What next?"

"Stay as you are, Leda," Vuron commanded. "The ape-heads must not know they have been duped yet. I will see to the attacks now, have Nergel make his sweep, personally command the left thrust. Mandrillagon will recoil, then Demogorgon will advance with his entire force. You will cease the delusion immediately upon arrival of the Jahklout force — it is probable that by then I'll have returned here, but..."

"You will be back to manage the main assault when Demogorgon comes?" Leda's voice held no fear as she asked that, but it was evident that in the area of command she felt inferior to Vuron.

"Palvlag is quite capable of managing the left flank I go there only to beguile the enemy into believing that the move is a major threat, so that Mandrillagon will react as we wish, and Demogorgon too. I will be back never fear, but now I must hurry, for we have spent too much time already, and the foe certainly will strike us soon."

She understood the latter. She could feel the approach of Mandrillagon, even though the simian demon lord was doing his utmost to disguise his movement and intent "Death to the foe," Leda said perfunctorily as she renewed her concentration on the Eye. Vuron didn't hear, for the thin albino general of the demon army was already on his way to the left flank of the long, triple-tiered line.

He found Palvlag at the very end of the formation. The demon was the last of the elder ones, now that Pazuzeus and Shabriri were no more. He who had been the least of them alone survived now. Vuron couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be the last of his own sort . . . He dismissed the thought quickly.

Palvlag was busily marshalling the new arrivals, evidently planning to use the bar-lgura unit as a flank guard, and the mixed formation as a reserve against a breakthrough of his portion of the front. Vuron liked the initiative shown by the protodemon. It was the sort of care and forethought that had probably been instrumental in Palvlag's ability to survive through the millennia. That, coupled with his hatred of Infestix and all those allied to the daemon ruler in any fashion, made Palvlag the most reliable of the greater demons serving Graz'zt — and Vuron himself, the albino added mentally.

Although he wasn't sure, Vuron thought that Shabriri had been some blood relation to Palvlag; not a brother, but a cousin or uncle, perhaps. The two of them had been as friendly and close as ones of demonkind ever became. When Shabriri had been slam because of Gravestone's bumbling, and because the latter had been Infestix's tool, the last of the protodemons had sworn a terrible oath, witnessed by Vuron at Palvlag's request. Palvlag would never rest until the master of the pits was no more, and he cared not if his own existence was snuffed out in the process.

"My Lord General?" Palvlag said with curt politeness when he finally noticed Vuron nearby, watching.

"Death to the enemy. Lord Captain," the albino demon responded formally. "Order the mixed regiment to the left flank of the bar-lgura immediately. Then you will command it as both units wheel out and sweep across the front parallel to our main line."

"There are naught but dumaldun trash there to fight. . . Even as he said that Palvlag's eyes clouded, going from burning orange to dull gold. Then all four suddenly lit up more fiercely than before. "Yes, General Vuron, I obey. I can sense Mandrillagon's approach. He is near! Who is to have overall command here, though?"

It was a logical question. "I will accompany you, Palvlag. The enemy must think this is more than two regiments attacking, that I plan a major

offensive movement. At any time, however, I may have to leave the area. The moment that happens, you will become commander again. Is that clear?"

"Most clear. General. Mandrillagon will probably panic at our approach. He will withdraw, and we will inflict severe casualties on whatever troops are there. Then the enemy will respond in some fashion, and your presence will be needed elsewhere."

Vuron gave the ancient protodemon a cold smile. "You are ever astute. Captain Palvlag. I will be sure to inform our liege lord of that. Graz'zt needs good generals."

"Generals? I care not a single turd for that," Palvlag spat. "I wish only to slay those who serve— "

"Enough! Carry out my orders, Palvlag. I know of your vendetta." He watched as the protodemon sped off, took charge of the body of mixed babau-ogres, nikomars, and the snaky ssilhex. The unit responded in clumsy fashion, but the troops seemed obedient and willing enough. Even as Palvlag marched it into position, though, there was a din along the front nearby. Mandrillagon and whatever force he commanded had begun their attack.

At the opposite end of the long line Nergel had Just sent his sweepings forth to harass the enemy skirmishers. The dumaldun were at least a match for the rutterkin and dretch, so those in the area began to cluster around the few hundred demon foes and fight. Then Nergel himself took the field, with the shambling boorixtroi on either hand. Dumaldun flew through the air, some dead, some dying, some in dismembered segments and serving as missiles. The hunched demon lord captain relished the slaughter, and in his mind he pictured it all clearly, putting it into a pattern that could be easily picked up by Vuron.

Nergel was so delighted by the success that he was careless. The message meant for his superior was broadcast too widely. The distant lords serving Demogorgon managed to snare the thought-picture and alert their master. And just then, another bit of information came to them.

"Lord Nergel," Leda called mentally, using more than the usual strength in the process. "Please receive this information." As she telepathically informed him of the important news, the dark elven priestess also pictured

what was occurring around her. The scene sprang into the crooked demon's mind, Nergel was even further elated — and the enemy was even better informed.

Two regiments of the stolid fesroo soldiery were only a few minutes away from joining his foray around the right flank The gila monster-visaged demons were obviously fresh and full of fight. Noble ssilhex led them. They were all Nergel's to command. Better still, massed just behind them were other reinforcements: companies of ghouls holding massive hyaenadons; battalions of ravening gholes, the trolls of ghoulkind; and finally at the rearmost position a brigade of tall gnoles, hyaena-headed demonlings of no great power but in numbers sufficient enough to be useful. With these were the fiercest of their sort, the ghulaz. It was sufficient to make the demon lord send forth peals of hideous, rippling laughter, as if Nergel were imitating the calls of the carrion beasts that approached.

"Yeenoghu's spawn!" he shouted aloud. "This means that Graz'zt has at least released some strength to us — to me! I command! Now, you sodden lumps of petaled flowers!" he called, shaking his gnarled fist in the direction of Demogorgon's position across the broad plain, using the foulest of names he could conjure to name his foes. "You sweet-smelling butterflies! Now you will howl under my heel!"

Clearly the pictures from Nergel's mind came to the watchers, and they relayed all just as quickly to their twin-headed master, Demogorgon. The great demon immediately had reserves brought up to be ready for the coming attack, but otherwise he remained waiting. Mandrillagon was Just striking the demon left with a corps of troops from outside the Abyss: a devil legion, a division of dreggals from Gehenna's depths, daemons and cacodaemons from Hades and Tarterus. The formation was echeloned so that it would first overlap the line Vuron had drawn, then strike it successive blows from the edge toward the middle. The legion of devils would meanwhile fall upon the flank and rear. If that succeeded, then the sudden addition to the enemy force on its right would be useless — better than useless. It would help in the destruction of the whole.

"Desperate trouble!" That was a panicky message sent by Mandrillagon.

Over the confused images being sent, Demogorgon sorted out what he could with one of his brains while the other head mentally asked, "What is it?"

"Renegade filth! The devils, the whole legion of them, were caught on the flank and ran away!" The words were accompanied by Mandrillagon's images of the occurrence. Antlered cohorts, devils of red hue and black scaled, bristled, spined. Attacking them were thousands of bounding, leaping furies, the gorilloid demons called bar-lgura. "How did the sixfingered mound of perfume gather so many?" Mandrillagon referred to Graz'zt, of course, and his consternation came from the fact that most of such demons as those who had routed the devils were dwellers on the spheres ruled by himself.

"Who cares?" his master telepathically returned with acidic thought. "I want all the picture now!"

Mandrillagon cringed mentally and physically but managed to comply. "It was the eunuch, Vuron, with the Theorpart — Palvlag, too. The fossil leads a whole corps of fresh troops." As he said that in his mind, the baboon-headed demon allowed pictures of the horde that Palvlag led to come to the surface of his thoughts.

"Bah! A few thousand of the babau-ogres, saucer-eyed nikomars in lesser numbers, and erhaps a thousand ssilhex. You are influenced by fear — by cowardice!"

"And the vaunted devils, prince?" Mandrillagon queried with derision. Demons near to him shrank back for the monstrous creature's face was contorted in fury, and his small eyes flamed with hatred. "Were they too moved by such fright?"

That made Demogorgon pause. He assessed all he had learned carefully. On the left of the enemy host, their general and strongest sub-commander were in the process of hooking around. Perhaps it was only a weak attack but it was an aggressive move. The force on the opposite end of their position was stronger, even though only Neigel was there to lead. . . . Perhaps that was a false assumption. "Withdraw slowly, cousin. Save what troops you can. Strike if possible at pursuit. When you've disengaged fully, set up a defensive position, then report here to me."

Without waiting for a reply, Demogorgon closed his mind. He had to find out exactly what was transpiring on the right of Vuron's front. The albino one was sly and tricky. If he appeared on one side, Demogorgon suspected that he had better watch the other closely. One of the scryers was nearby. A score of powerful ahazu-demons served the two-headed demon king as officers and watchers. "What force now on our left?"

"Rot the foe," the square-shaped demon responded, "and may your power wax over all. Great Demogorgon. Ten thousand of the fesroo newly come are at work there. We have seen the arrival of half again as many of the subjects of Yeenoghu, my Liege. More I cannot venture. . . ."

So! Fresh troops in some numbers. If so many were apparent, then there were probably more hidden. No matter. Even if the black one had sent twice that many, and Lord Yeenoghu with them. It was too little. Vuron and Palvlag far to the left; Nergel, possibly Yeenoghu, on the far right. The long line, the center, would have only the weakling toad-kisser.

Vastyi, to command — he and the drow bitch Eclavdra. Demogorgon began to issue orders with both heads.

"Screen both of our flanks strongly. A corps of hordlings on our right should hold any advance by the enemy there. Send three divisions of dreggals to the left," the demon prince's leftmost head commanded simultaneously. "Send for my war bands of dusins, all of them. The reserve of mixed demons, too. Every daemon company and all of the remaining dumalduns as well are to advance when the iron gongs are beaten!"

Demogorgon meant to strike the enemy now, squarely in the center of their long, thin line. Vuron's position was attenuated, the albino had put himself out of place, and both flanks were busy attacking. This was the perfect time for a counterstroke, a blow that would break the enemy in the middle and bring total defeat to them. Fifty thousand dusins, fearless and tough, with crocodile Jaws and iron weapons, his own guards, would be the point that would break the foe's front and pierce its heart. With superiority of six to one, there could be no doubt that they would triumph. To be on the safe side, though, Demogorgon decided to accompany the assault in person, bringing with him the Theorpart that Infestix had placed in his charge. The power of the relic would assure that no leader of the foe managed to interfere.

Chapter 5

THE CLANGOR OF IRON GONGS was rolling thunder across the field. The beating of the sixty great discs almost drowned out the tramp of demon foot and dreggal hoof. A hundred thousand feet and even more hooves: the hard ground trembled.

As a great avalanche moves came the center of Demogorgon's horde. The twin-tailed banners above Demogorgon's own guards were of obsidian black and bright green, just as were the tabards of the thickly thewed dusin demons who marched beneath the flapping pennons. A dozen or more other flags sprouted from the blocks of soldiers flanking them: gold and maroon represented the dreggals, stark purples and plums trimmed with a rainbow of other hues showed where contingents from Hades advanced, while dull violet and somber old silver showed the strength of cacodaemon contingents recruited from Tarterus.

When the center was well away, splayed feet with homy talons, flat elephantine feet, and a weird variety of other sorts too began to move. In ordered step and in disordered stride, a quarter of a million beings and beasts from all the nether realms went forward. Before and behind were scores of petty demon princes and nobles from the other dark planes. The pit hag Raanwil Ledli strode before the cacodaemons in all her obese splendor. Oqokashtor waddled behind the mass of dreggals, with Volophon and Meurteenz having the unenviable forefront positions. Poshban, Agadin, Zerkaar, Vloorm, and other such lordlings from the Abyss drove on their masses of demons. There would be no straggling, no shirking, no flight When the time came, these greater ones would have their work too, for each had enemy champions to fight against, from minor lord to flamewrapped raloog.

Thus all across the entire plain the horde of Demogorgon came, rolling down upon Vuron's position so that its center would strike with the flanks refused — for there, the ape-headed demonking knew, was where the greatest strength of the enemy was clustered. Into the very heart of the albino's line went the attack with the guard dusin corps leading. Both Mandrillagon and Demogorgon were with the roaring dusins, exhorting the demons on, using the force of the Theorpart to strike the foe, to counter any magic used against the attack.

When the wedge-shaped formation of Demogorgon's own struck the thin line opposing it, though, there was a sudden shift. The dusins struck at nothing. The enemy had been naught but illusion. Instead, the line that actually existed was a V-shaped one, and its base was packed with fesroo twenty ranks deep and stiffened by the grinning, bat-faced raloog company that served Vuron as the dusins did Demogorgon. With these greater ones of demonkind was the albino lord himself, wielding a Theorpart in counterpoise to that of the enemy, while nearby was the drow named Eclavdra, high priestess and bearer of the Eye of Deception.

Even as the two forces met with a crash and roar, Demogorgon understood the depth of his own folly, from the distortion of time to the drawing forth of his army. Perhaps he did have a horde that greatly outnumbered the one he fought, but Vuron had brought up fresh troops, packed the center, and then drawn Demogorgon into it. Two or three to one was all the superiority he had here, but the Eye of Deception worked unhindered. The Theorparts wielded by him and the sexless albino cancelled each other out, Vastyi countered Mandrillagon, and the flame demons were sufficient to match all of the greater ones who led his force here. Now Palvlag could thrust into his flank from the right, and Nergel from the left, for his own wings were far back and hardly moving. Giant Jaws were about to close on half of Demogorgon's army!

Two heads, two brains have their advantages. Demogorgon used that edge now. While his left continued to grasp and manipulate the flow of energies from the portion of the relic he held, his right sent a command back to the handful of lieutenants still behind. "Every reserve to me in the center, now! Then have the wings charge. Do you hear? Charge!"

"We hear and obey. Great Demogorgon," came a chorus of responses from the ahazu-demons.

Forgetting that, the twin-headed master of demons began a mental search for his ally, Infestix. Perhaps he had managed to extricate his forces from the trap, perhaps not. Only hard fighting over a long period would answer the question. Demogorgon wished to take no such chance, even at the cost of his pride.

Not now, not with the other Theorpart so close! If the wretched, puling daemon could be of use, why not? Infestix had promised much more than

he had delivered so far. Let the rotting scum provide what was needed now.

"Lord of Hades. Master of the Pits, Nerull-Death, daemon Infestix," the right brain sent forth the call. "You must come now, now. I have locked the foe into an iron grasp, and they cannot flee." That was true, although it admitted nothing about the reverse. Demogorgon could not escape either from this duel to destruction. "Bring all force available, and the Theorpart of Graz'zt is ours!"

Demons and others of the lower realms shouted and snarled, screamed and howled as they struck and were struck killed and were slain in a terrible melee that soon stretched for miles across the featureless plain on this unnamed tier of the Abyssal microcosm. The two lines swayed back and forth, clotted, thinned, bulged one way or the other. Windrows of dead marked the changing positions. Fluid ran — bloodlike stuff, pale ichor, glowing phlogiston. Weapons glittered with those substances, the ground underfoot became a mire from the liquid. The attackers were decimating their foes, but in turn the forces under Demogorgon's command were being doubly killed. To the right and the left there was a bloody standoff. In the middle portion of the field, the mass of dusins and the other soldiers of the nether planes was being slowly compacted. The two arms were circling, mandibles closing. It was becoming more and more difficult to move within the cauldron there. Then reinforcements pressed in from behind, and the press was too great to manage.

Now the troops that had so proudly marched under the black and green flags began to die in waves of a hundred at a time, and so tightly packed were they that no return blow could be struck Demogorgon had no choice. He turned the force of his Theorpart outward, so that the battalions to either hand could force the jaws back gain fighting room. With his second brain, the great lord of demons sent forth energy to counter the Eye of Deception too, for that instrument was making it impossible for his lieutenants to find and counter the nobles of the enemy, and in the resulting confusion Vuron's powerful ones were slaying the lesser demons, dreggals, and cacodaemons by companies.

The shift he accomplished was so sudden and unexpected that Vuron was caught unawares. By the time the pale demon lord was able to switch the energies of his own artifact to attack Demogorgon personalty, it was too late. The trap had been forced open, and the attackers were able to gain

room to defend themselves again. The battle resumed its former character, one of slow and terrible attrition. Vuron's army had inflicted appalling losses upon its foes. Demogorgon's horde now numbered no more than twice the smaller force, and many of his leaders and champions were dead. In the process, Vuron had used the Theorpart he wielded to deal great punishment to his two-headed antagonist.

"You will pay," Demogorgon snarled telepathically as he dampened the albino's attack with the power of his own relic.

"Will I?" Vuron shot back across the wild battleground. "We shall see, little monkey-heads. Soon now there will be none of your soldiers between us, and then I will come for you with my raloogs."

"Shoat! That would be like you. Too weak and sniveling to face me alone!"

"You fled from King Graz'zt, as I recall," Vuron jibed mentally.

"Eat honey!" Demogorgon spat, then returned his attention to matters at hand. He wouldn't be duped easily again by the albino. Even that brief exchange had been too dear. The Eye was working again, and the losses inflicted by it and the enemy troops had reduced his superiority by more than a trifle. At the rate the battle was going, when the enemy army was cut to half its original number, there would be scarcely more troops left in his own force.

If only the dogs like Var-Az-Hloo and Bulumuz hadn't gone over to Orcus! The big-gutted one and Iuz together. ... It was Demogorgon's alliance with Infestix that had brought that pairing about. Even demons have loyalty of a sort, and Demogorgon had made common cause with Infestix's force, the hated foes of demonkind, in order to gain parity with Graz'zt. Iuz, Orcus, and the others accused him of selling out the Abyss for the Theorpart. Well, let them! With the one he held, he would gain the second portion, and the two would bring him the last third. Then would Graz'zt be expunged, Orcus annihilated, and Infestix and all the daemons and devils too laid low. Tharizdun arise? Never! He, Demogorgon, would emerge as triumphant lord of darkness — a darkness that would cloak all. "Infestix!" he shouted telepathically.

"The moment is at hand!"

* * *

Something was certainly at hand. Leda sensed it. "We have beaten them, I think," she ventured to the nearby albino.

"No. Not quite. Demogorgon is sly and quick, I'll give him that. He managed to slip open the trap, so now the struggle will be long and very costly. We have better fighters, yet his horde is still more numerous. He is attempting something more," Vuron added, "but I can't pierce his screening energies. I can't tell what ploy he works on."

"Our left and right both stand firm. I use the force of the Eye there," Leda informed the albino, "so that the enemy wastes strength against phantoms while our own kill them in droves. We cannot lose now!"

"Can't? The Eye is worth a division, two perhaps. Yet I think you may be right in your assessment. Something impends. Let us trust it is the victory you speak of." He turned a corner of his mind to the others who commanded. "Palvlag. have you any reserve to spare?" The response was negative. The ancient protodemon had every demon committed to the fight on the left. The same reply came from Nergel, who was pressing ahead, grinding down the foe, but had no reserves. "Ah, if our liege only had a little more strength to spare us," Vuron sighed to himself. With a single fresh division he could have shattered Demogorgon's center. But it was not to be. There was a single company in reserve, rutterkin at that.

"Eclavdra," he sent, using the dark elven priestess's known name. "Cease work on the wings. Summon a raloog — any of the flaming ones will do. It will command the company of its fellows there when they follow me as I confront the two-headed one."

Leda looked to where Vuron had indicated. She saw the sneer-visaged rutterkin trying to conceal their fear with blustering and poses of bravery. She almost questioned the albino then, nearly asked if he was mistaken or perhaps losing his mind under the pressure of the dweomers sent by the enemy. Then she understood, for Vuron had preceded his statement by ordering her to stop spending force on the flanks. That meant she was to use the Eye of Deception elsewhere.

"I hear and obey. General," she sent. Then she located a towering raloog, ordered it close, and set her mind on the rutterkin. "Yes, commander?" the sooty demon growled a moment later. Leda nodded toward her right. The

raloog saw a force of fifty of its kind standing there, glowering toward the battle. "Take them into the fight," she told the monster. "Stay with Lord General Vuron no matter what, or you shall feel the terror of Graz'zt's displeasure." The raloog nodded, then struck its head in salute. A few moments later Vuron strode forward. His soldiers forced an opening in the enemy front, made an aisle, and the albino strode into the carnage.

Mandrillagon saw him first and sent a warning toward Demogorgon. It was sufficient to cause the great demon prince to quail. Vuron had told him before that he would come with his personal troop of raloogs to fight when the battle was nearly finished. The implication was evident. In fact, Demogorgon's demons and the other troops from the netherspheres shrank back at the sight of the alabaster-fleshed demon lord leading a half-hundred flame-demons forth to fight. Was the contest decided in favor of Graz'zt's dogs, then? If so, Demogorgon would not stay to die with the useless dunghills who had failed him! But no, the time to retire and re-form a new horde was not quite at hand. There was still an interval, still hope.

"Attack them!" the twin-headed demon king ordered, speaking to the demon who commanded the companies of dusins that formed a square around their master. The demon looked pale but did as ordered. As the square, heavy dusins fought the dusky, flame-limned raloogs, Demogorgon shouted loudly, "Come on, Vuron the Lily! Here I am awaiting you personally!"

"I accept!" The reply came clearly and from nearby. Vuron, clad in his silvered battle armor and bearing a long, crystalline spear, was suddenly almost face to face with his challenger. It was daring, for Demogorgon was almost twice as tall and easily four times more massive than the albino. It was the lance that Vuron carried that made him confident that he wasn't merely throwing away his life in accepting single combat with the demon king.

Wherever the crystalline point sunk home a netherbeing expired, but it was not Demogorgon who braved the peril. Even as the albino came forth to do battle, the towering prince of the Abyss was communicating with his chief ally, Infestix, at last. "The moment is passing!" the demon telepathically snarled. "Why aren't you here?"

"Hold fast, brave and clever ruler of demonkind," came the sarcastic reply from Infestix. "I am but seconds away."

"Then the day is ours!" Demogorgon sent back "for I have lured Vuron and his guards into the heart of my own formation, and the stupid fish-belly bears the artifact as he comes."

The boast did not disturb the master of daemons. He was quite familiar with demon claims. It was obvious to Infestix that Vuron was pressing the battle and Demogorgon was losing the fight. That was why Infestix was coming. The lord of the pits had kept close track of the whole confrontation. He had no intention of allowing the dual-headed menace to bungle things and lose the Theorpart that was Infestix's own. Neither did the greatest of daemons intend to allow Demogorgon actually to gain a second portion of the relic of deepest Evil. At a word, the Theorpart the ape-headed being held would desert the demon and send itself to Infestix's hands. A careful harmonic had been built within it to assure that. The portion of the artifact also had within itself the frequency of its fellow Theorpart, the one wielded by the albino demon lord. If the latter was joined to the former, then Infestix could indeed call both portions to himself. The wily emperor of the netherspheres had planned well. He could not compensate for the general incompetence of demons, though. "I am here!" The daemon appeared in his avatar, Nerull, as he spoke; and he stood beside Demogorgon as he did so.

"What?" Demogorgon was startled. Such transferences were not possible in the Abyssal planes, especially when great artifacts of utmost evil power were radiating disruptive dweomers in opposition. Of course, Infestix had used the very powers at play to do so. "How . . . ?" the demonking began, then switched his tack "Where are your troops? We need force to wrest the thing from the slug's grasp!"

"Never fear, Demogorgon," Nerull-Infestix said casually, watching the dusins die horribly, one after another, as Vuron came ever closer with his deadly, ensorcelled spear. "Help for you is at hand."

"I see none, you . . ."

"Faithful and brave ally," Nerull's rasping, wormchoked voice supplied in place of the invective the demon was undoubtedly about to use. "It is about to come with a bang, so to speak. It will surprise the enemy as much as you. , . ."

The "bang" came a second later. Demogorgon, even forewarned as he was, gave an involuntary start as what sounded like a tremendous thunderclap broke directly overhead and sent rolling echoes along the whole length of the plain. As the sound reverberated in the sky, there appeared the eight Diseased Ones fully arrayed for battle, and with these fearsome daemons were the whole of the plagante, NerullInfestix's horrid elite soldiers. The entire force numbered but a few hundred, but each of the plagante was equal to a greater demon, at least a match for any raloog, for example. Furthermore, the force appeared in the space just behind the position where Demogorgon stood, the place threatened by Vuron's advance. Without need of direction, the Diseased Ones rushed toward the advancing demons, and behind them stormed the plagante. Demogorgon bellowed in triumphant glee at the sight, and not far distant Mandrillagon too picked up the hooting as he observed the sudden turn of events.

The appearance of the daemon elite nearly cost Vuron his existence. The Diseased Ones were upon him as hounds hariy a wolf. The albino managed to ply his long spear just in time. One of the rotting fiends was too slow, or careless, or overconfident The translucent facet of the tlp took the daemon squarely in the throat, and the ranks of Infestix's own had a sudden vacancy. Immediately thereafter, however, the albino demon lord was backing away as quickly as he could while still protecting himself from attack The raloogs clustered near and saved him.

"Very superior, Leda! Fine work!" Vuron of course referred to the dark elven priestess's employment of the power of the Eye of Deception. The rutterkin were now indeed flame-demons for all intents and purposes. The foes thought them thus, and the cringing Jackals themselves seemed to perform as if they were fearless raloogs. "Can you keep it up?"

"Yes," Leda replied mentally, assurance and confidence strongly contained in the thought. "A powerful energy flows through me, and I can wield the instrument as long as needed."

"Do so," Vuron sent back laconically. "The enemy presses me, and to either hand our forces thrust ahead against them. I must not only extricate myself but save Graz'zt's army from certain destruction. The roll of the wheel has placed us beneath its weight." The ability of the drow to continue to use the energy in and channeled by the demoniacal artifact would normally have caused the albino to be wary. Under current circumstances

Vuron was merely satisfied that Leda could perform the task without breaking. The Eye of Deception drained those who employed it, unless they somehow garnered power from some outside source while utilizing the thing.

Graz'zt's ploy against his enemies recently was the most clever use of the Eye that Vuron could think of, and the albino was himself quite wise and clever. That he had not envisioned such a trick made Vuron more steadfast in his loyalty to the ebon prince of his kind. Such thoughts as those, rather than questioning the frail female's prowess in so long being able to handle the object, filled that portion of Vuron's mind not occupied with matters at hand.

Attuning the Theorpart to serve as nothing more than a Jamming device and counterpower to that of Demogorgon's, the thin demon lord pried the lance he held to keep the press of the daemons from him. The milky crystal of the spear was filled with deadly energy, for the weapon was one of the sixty-six arms of power belonging to the Abyss. Within the plane's manifold spheres, the lance was potent enough to slay mighty foes with a single thrust. Even beyond, in other netherplanes or elsewhere, Vuron's long spear was a fell force, but in the Abyss itself, wielded by the one it was forged by and for, the thing was of utmost potency. Plagante fell one after another to its leafbladed point as the albino retreated toward his own position step by careful step. The remaining seven of the Diseased Ones were careful to avoid facing Vuron. That enabled him to make good his withdrawal.

The daemon elite did its best to prevent Vuron's escape, trying desperately to encircle him before the albino reached the safety of his lines. It was a close thing, but by dint of his own fighting ability and the work of Leda with the Eye, Vuron managed to slip between the threatening pincers of plagante and into the safety of the files between his defending ranks of demon soldiers.

Vastyi was driving deeply into the horde of Mandrillagon on the left, while Zabulon, a high rakshasa given charge of the right center, was likewise slicing deeply into the mixed force of demons, dreggals, and hordlings opposing his troops there. Immediately upon seeing that Vuron had escaped, Infestix must have brought Demogorgon's attention to the now vulnerable salients to either hand. It was all the albino could manage to

effectuate his own retreat The ones on the flanks of his advance paid heavily as the infuriated daemons fell upon them.

So too the make-believe raloogs. Although they seemed to be flame-beings, and their attacks were as effective as those of real sort, the rutterkin were neither as staunch nor sturdy as true raloogs. The attacks of plagante and others cut them down to the last even as Vuron attained safety. Only the one leading the false raloogs, Guicar, survived. He was sorely wounded and near to expiring at that.

After sending urgent commands to Vastyi and Zabulon to pull back, Vuron turned his attention to the raloog. "You are rewarded, one called Guicar," the albino general said hurriedly, touching the bat-faced monster with an alabaster-hued palm. A wave of demoniac energy leaped from Vuron's body into the torn form of the raloog. The creature's soundness was instantly restored, strength returned.

"Great Prince Vuron . . the raloog stammered in its growling basso.

"Only Graz'zt is great," Vuron rebuked. "I am merely his general and slave, as you are slave to me!" Then, as the flame-demon attempted to make amends, Vuron tapped him quickly with the Theorpart, silencing the raloog's near-pleadings. "No more. Gain power, grow strong, be hateful. In Graz'zt's name I so bestow the boon. Serve him well."

Then the albino was off to see to his army's safety. and to prepare for a general withdrawal. Vuron knew all too well that the position was now untenable. Demogorgon would be reinforced by fresh, contingents of his own subject demons, drafts of other troops from the spheres obeying Infestix's will. The enemy would receive a hundred thousand new soldiers in but a little space of time, while the best Vuron could hope lor was a dozen companies of minor demons scraped up by press gangs.

It was a tenuous position, but eventually Vuron managed to solidify a bow-shaped line and resist further advances by Demogorgon. The solid protodemon Palvlag, Jittering Nergel, and the eccentric Vastyi seemed to rise above themselves in the face of the impending disaster. Because they lent their own force to that of the albino, things did not collapse.

When the smogs rose and what passed for nighttime on the tier finally came, the enemy withdrew to take up a position facing Vuron's, and the great battle was concluded.

"It is another draw, Lord General," Guicar said with satisfaction. The raloog was now serving as adjutant to Vuron. The relic's power had made the flame-demon stronger than most of his kind, and the status that was thus accorded to Guicar by other raloogs fed yet more energy to him. Selection of officers was a simple matter in demon forces. The strongest, cleverest, slyest, most awful and malign naturally rose to command. Only nobles would not show respect for the raloog now. "Will you take the fight to them again tomorrow?"

"No, Lieutenant," Vuron said, wondering if all those who had observed the contest had so mistaken an impression of the results. "I will soon order the whole army to march away, toward the stronghold of our king. You will see to it that all troops under your command are silent, orderly, and swift when the time to leave this field comes."

"Ah. . . . Yes, Lord General Vuron," the raloog rumbled with an expression of delight playing across his bat-faced countenance. "You will again dupe those petty morsels into another trap!"

"Ahemmm. . . . Something like that. Lieutenant Guicar. Now see to your charges. There is much to do." The flame-demon stalked off, satisfied of the strength of his lord, the ultimate surety of victory evident in his mind. Vuron knew that would be conveyed to the others of his ilk, and to the thousands of lesser demons in the horde as well. That was all to the benefit. Now, what of the long term?

He would ask permission of Graz'zt to take up a new position that meshed with the whole of the ebon demonking's sphere of defense. That way they would be on interior lines. The two forces that sought to destroy Graz'zt's empire, take the Theorpart, and probably annihilate the great demon in the bargain, were uneasy allies at best. With a globe around his realm, the ability to shift troops, move rapidly, wield magicks in defense, they would be made less friendly to one another. Each of the foes wished the artifact for a different purpose. Demon could be set against daemon, cacodaemon against dreggal. Perhaps Vuron could even engineer a falling-out between Orcus and Iuz, for the ram-faced blob surely hated the cambion with almost the same fervor as Orcus despised Demogorgon. All that was for the future. Now it was necessary to gain a defensive position that would serve as a strong place, and step towards consolidation with the rest of his king's forces as well. It was time to bring Graz'zt a full report, so that the

great ebon monarch could make intelligent decisions — and the ideas fed to him by his most loyal vassal, general, and servant must be in that category. In that regard Leda, too, must have knowledge and think correctly. Her influence added to his would make things almost a certainty.

"Leda, you must return to our liege and bring him my report."

"Of course, Vuron. When should I depart?"

"As soon as possible. Take the Eye of Deception with you. It assures your safe and swift passage. More importantly, our king will need it soon, I fear. When Iuz and his cohorts get word of what has happened here, they will surely begin attacking again."

The dark elf was puzzled by that statement. "Why, Vuron? We dealt the foes a cruel blow here, and our losses were paltry compared to those of Demogorgon's."

"The ape-heads will leak out misleading figures. Our casualties will be half a million rather than fifty thousand, and our reinforcements will be overstated by a like factor — regiments for companies, corps for brigades. Infestix too will assist in that for many reasons, not the least of which is his worm-fat pride. Two of his Diseased Ones were skewered by my lance, and he and his puppet demons lost a quarter of a million soldiers."

Leda understood. "If Iuz begins attacking, there will be no more reinforcements of any kind for this front then. Demogorgon will not have to face another situation like this again. Our force can be worn down, eroded, and finally beaten by sheer weight. . . ."

Vuron nodded and gave Leda a little bow. "Very astute, priestess — as should be for one favored by Graz'zt Explain all of that to him when he has received my report. I urge a contiguous line of defense, so that we will have interior lines. That way a reserve can be created as a central pool. Wherever the enemy strikes, the reserve can be moved to counter the threat. With but a quarter of the enemy's strength we can thus hold out for a nearly indefinite time."

"That seems reasonable, General," Leda agreed with hesitation, "but is there no way to assume a winning position?"

That brought the albino into a tense attitude, and his pale, red-pink eyes fixed with a lambent fire upon the small drow. "What is that you ask?" Leda

squared her little shoulders and made a reply, but Vuron didn't pay attention. He was deep inside himself assessing his statements and hers too, all that had occurred.

"Never mind," he told Leda, more to silence her than for any other reason. He had articulated to her what he had kept inside himself as a secret that must never be uttered, especially to Graz'zt or any who spoke directly to the ebon monarch. For a long time now it had been all too apparent to Vuron that there was no real hope. The three portions of the ancient artifact the key to Tharizdun's prison, would never cease their active operation to unite. All were at work in the Abyss. Graz'zt held one, so the ones possessed by others — demon, daemon, even devil, no matter — would strive to be brought together by it. Fickleness would have no part in the eventuality. Demon alliances could break apart and re-form, invaders could be cut down, and still the relics would gravitate toward one another.

For now, two strove against one. Was there hope of gaining a second Theorpart? Could the balance be shifted in Graz'zt's favor then? Vuron was certain that both answers were no. "He is doomed by it now, and it is I who forged that doom," the pale demon whispered aloud.

"Pardon, my Lord? I didn't hear you."

"Nothing, Leda," Vuron said briskly. "I merely spoke thoughts aloud. . . . We sometimes place greater measures of independence upon ourselves than actually exist, you know. How greatly do we overestimate our own strength and meaning? Is it in the same magnitude? Greater by far, I think" Vuron gazed down at the perfect, sable-hued face of the elf. Its color was so like that of his king's. He had sought only to serve Graz'zt for eternity.. ..

"Time is fleeting. Lord Vuron," Leda finally said, growing uncomfortable under the demon's glassy stare.

"Time? So too power, renown, and all glory within the cosmos," the albino said with a snarl. "That is of no matter at this moment. As I said, we must have interior lines so that we can defend successfully until the unnatural alliances formed against us break from their own disparate natures. Soon enough new allies will come to serve Graz'zt, and the interloping dogs from Hades and the other netherspheres will be chased back to their kennels." Vuron hoped that those words would remain foremost in her mind when Leda reported to the demon king. "Here is my

written account of the battle, my assessment of the situation, and plans for what we must do. It is a primitive way to communicate, but the enemy can't eavesdrop on such."

Leda took the thick box of leather and metal, a container covered with runes and sealed fast with black wax bearing Vuron's mark "I will give it directly into the hands of our liege immediately. Lord General."

"Guard it with your life! Don't hesitate to utilize the Eye to protect it."

With a bow, then a formal salute, the dark elf withdrew. "It should not be necessary, Vuron," Leda said just before she departed. "I intend to take the fastest route to the palace, so there will be few likely to be encountered along the way. Before the smogs rise here again, Graz'zt will have your intelligence in his hands."

Vuron nodded, and she left with quick steps. Only after Leda was gone did he think to ask her about how she felt. The albino recalled that when he looked at Leda's face, she had seemed fresh, lovely. Her countenance should have been drawn and haggard. The strain of using the Eye should have left its mark thus. Did she possess some witchery that enabled the drow priestess to resist even so great a thing as the Eye of Deception? If so, then it was time for him to get rid of her. After all, Vuron had decided to create Leda in counter to Eclavdra, for that one's influence had been too strong and too much directed toward her own glorification. Leda's twin would have not hesitated to lessen Graz'zt in order to make herself greater. Now there was a possibility that her clone had even greater spiritual strength and inner power than Eclavdra had possessed. Should that be true, and should Leda decide to employ her energy in a way that Vuron didn't direct, then she might actually displace him. That was something the demonlord hadn't considered since Leda came into being; Leda as such, rather than what she had been prior, a mere duplicate of Eclavdra. The original dark elven high priestess wouldn't have hesitated to work any mischief in order to gain advantage. Was Leda far from that?

As soon as possible he would set matters right in that regard, Vuron vowed silently. First the withdrawal to a new defensive line, then the machinations to destroy Leda's influence . . . perhaps Leda.

Chapter 6

IT WAS AS BIRTH, only the passage was doubly painful now. Separation and self-reliance were immediately ahead. The whole of the cold and unforgiving experience of life was graven in steel. No escape. Certain end. Did an infant wall in premonition? Certainly it knew of its loss in some way, but never so starkly as this.

Inside the Soulless Sounding could be found all things and no things. The saddest, most melancholy of dreams — of all those loved and gone, loved and lost. Each parting was final. impossibly ended, yet seen and experienced again in such a way as to negate it while knowing that it remained. No matter — soon enough there would be no memory whatsoever ... or would that alone remain forever . . . ?

Gord and Gellor were alone, helpless, lost in a gloom that clouded the senses. There was no haven to be found, no escape in the dreadful night. The things that dwelled always therein were not so deprived. They moved and stalked, coming ever closer, hungering.

The portal was a hole dug into the frozen ground, a place just long and wide enough to contain a bier.

Seen from above, the depth seemed such that its contents were but four feet below. It was a coffin with a lid of pure crystal. Inside was a corpse upon which till manner of worms and foul things battened, but the ghastly visage of the thing smiled a terrible grin of welcome to the viewer.

Being in the passage was like falling forever, with the surety of a terrible impact of equal duration. The sickening weightlessness reached its absolute maximum, an ecstasy of terror from which there was no escape. Even as the free falling sent its delightful sensations and its nausea through the entire being, the prospect of crushing impact at the infinitely distant end was there, compacting, rupturing, breaking internally.

"What do demons perceive when in this place?"

"Think not on that," Gord advised his companion when Gellor uttered that question. The same thought had indeed come to the young champion's mind as he experienced the horrors of traversing the Soulless Sounding. "No matter what, only the greatest can survive the ordeal."

"Small wonder," the bard growled, shaking his grizzled head to clear the awful things filling his brain. "This journey is one I vow never to make again!"

Gord understood all too well. It seemed as if they had wandered in a delirium for ages. Between breaths, whole decades passed. Was that delusion? Who could say for certain in such a twisted continuum as this? Was there a reality here? Or was everything drawn only from the minds of those who were so foolish as to enter the Soulless Sounding? No matter. The visitors walked, crawled, ran, fell, crept flew.

In any manner they could, they moved, seeking the place they instinctively knew was that which would lead them to their goal.

Gord was reflecting thus when an apparition made him start and tremble. "This accursed place now seeks to steal the last of my sanity," he muttered loudly enough for his companion to overhear. "Would that she were really so near!"

"She?" the troubador asked, even though he knew that his friend had not meant for him to hear. Then he, too, saw. "I too see a drow clad in demon armor coming nigh. Beware that vision, Gord! The thing she bears has an aura of deepest malevolence."

"It is no drow bearing evil," Gord countered. "I have conjured up in my mind the dream of Leda — she who meant all to me, the one who gave her soul to prevent the incursion of all darkness." As he said those words, Gord's mind brought back scenes of the beautiful dark elf as they first met long ago on Oerth. He saw again the search for the Theorpart in the dusty wastes of the Ashen Desert, saw her save his life, then condemn herself to an eternity of misery by going with Vuron to the depths of demonium.

Gellor received those pictures from his friend, felt the emotions that wrapped them. "I am sorry, Gord, very sorry to intrude," the troubador said with a husky voice. "You fairly blast your thoughts out, and I have no choice but to share . . ."

"What matter? There is nothing left any more."

"But she is here!"

"Here? No — not unless the whole of the Abyss is here, unless eternal service to Graz'zt is here!"

"Stop bloring as a sheep, and attend my words, Gord! If you and I see the same thing, then it is no dementia brought about by the sickness of this place. We are seeing what is!"

At that, Gord stopped his depressed rantings and stared. Seeming to float, making swimming motions, before them was indeed Leda — or one who was her clone, as she had been of Eclavdra. The drow priestess was alternately near and far, whether from distortion of sight or actual distance in the Soulless Sounding. She bore a strange bag, the thing that the bard had remarked fairly shone of blazing evil force. Perhaps it was that very thing that enabled Leda, or whoever the drow female was, to move so swiftly through the strange, sick space.

Six thousand six hundred and sixty regions there were in the Abyss, all found in the six hundred sixtysix tiers that formed the chaotic sphere of demonium. Of the whole of this black netherplane, fully six hundred of the layers could be reached via the Soulless Sounding. The uppermost tiers and the farthest regions of the Abyss, those most removed from the middle and upper planes, were distant from the distorted tube that pierced space. The greater portion, though, fully eighty percent of the whole, could be reached by a relatively brief journey through the terrible passage called the Soulless Sounding. Of course, only the very strongest of beings could survive for more than a few minutes within its distorted, mind-twisting confines.

The dark elf whom Gord and Gellor observed was now moving with astonishing rapidity, evidently heading for the same destination as the two of them sought, a distant place marked by iridescent striatums reminiscent of black opal and ancient silver hammered into six great horseshoe-shaped arches.

"She will escape us!" Gord exclaimed, noting that the drow was traveling at a far faster rate than he and his companion were. "Come on, hurry!"

Gellor made a valiant effort, but soon realized that he was quite unable to keep up with Gord. "You go ahead as fast as you can," he panted. "I'll follow and catch up with you when you reach that one and stop her."

With hardly a backward glance, Gord assented and rushed ahead. In order to speed his progress he drew forth Courflamme, knowing that its power would be much multiplied once the weapon was out of its scabbard and consciously applied to his movement. "Now, sword," he whispered to the

strange blade of sooty metal and bright crystal. "Carry me with all speed to where that dark elf is!"

It was as if the weapon understood. Gord felt a flow of energy from his fingers, through hand and arm, to the very tips of his toes. At the same moment he also felt as if the blade were leeching force from him. Now almost one entity, sword and swordsman shot ahead as quickly as if Gord were astride a sleek courser, and the distance between him and the dark elf melted away by the second.

As the gap closed to what seemed no more than a spear-cast, the pursued drow sensed that someone or something followed and spun around, drawing something from the rune-emblazoned bag as she turned. "Away!" she commanded, her face a hard mask of power and demoniacal threat. Then her lovely lilac eyes opened wide, the rest of what she was about to say was forgotten, and instead her face softened into wonderment as she cried, "Gord? Gord? Is it really you?"

He wanted to call the same question back asking the vision before him if she were the real, true Leda. Instead, Gord restrained the urge, forced himself to stand fast. "I am Gord," he said firmly, even as the young champion drew upon all of his powers to study and analyze the one who stood before his gaze. It was no illusion, no creature masked by dark dweomer, no shapeshifter or sham.

Leda was now doing the same thing. The man who appeared to her to be Gord, her forever lost love, responded coolly, stood aloof and staring when she called to him. Drawing upon the energy within the Eye of Deception, and using it with her own abilities, Leda scanned the one who said he was indeed Gord. She saw only the surface of him, that and a leaping aura of mixed bright and dark. She could penetrate no deeper, even with the strength of the Abyssal artifact aiding her sight. Wary, withdrawing slightly now, Leda responded, "Are you? Are you so?"

Satisfied, Gord in turn stepped closer to Leda, a smile of joy beginning to spread across his face, gray eyes brimming with happiness. "Leda . . ."

"Stay still, you!" the dark elven priestess demanded, focusing the iris of the Eye upon him. "I think you are some other one masquerading as the favored of Rexfelis."

"No, Leda, no! It is truly I. Look at me, read my aura, test my statements to see if there is any falsehood in them."

Rather than admit her inability to do so, for display of weakness was tantamount to death anywhere in the Abyss, especially here in the Soulless Sounding, Leda dissembled, pretending to test him as he had suggested, even as she secretly watched the approach of another who was struggling through the thick stuff of the place trying to Join the two. It would take several minutes, perhaps longer, for that one to arrive. There was little time to spare. She would make one more inquiry before using the artifact to blast the impostor from existence. "I see . . . yes," she said to the might-be-Gord slowly, screening her mind carefully as she spoke. "But what is the diamond and jet force which springs forth around you? That is not the aura of Gord of Grimalkin."

"Gord of what?" The strangeness of what Leda spoke set his mind racing. He saw the thing, a swirled sphere of blacks and almost-blacks with a glaring spot of hateful fire growing in its center, pulse and shimmer in her hands. It came to him in a flash. Leda was about to loose some bolt of energy upon him. Why? Had she become a true spawn of the Abyss? A soulless demon?

Never! Then it was something else that brought the dark elf to the brink of slaying him. That she cared for him radiated plainly from her. The cause was certain, then. She was suspicious, thought that he was an impostor. These things took but a splitsecond to enter and leave his consciousness. He realized that Leda was unable to penetrate the dweomers he had surrounded himself with, and the force of Courflamme too served to shield his actual nature, would not allow penetration of his being. Without hesitation, Gord let the sword slip from his hand. "Now," he said with open palms and love filling him, "seek again for Gord of Greyhawk."

"It cannot be!"

"But it Is, Leda! Don't you see me truly now?"

The beautiful features of the dark elf were drawn into a frown. "Yes. The energy of that weapon masked much — it hid your power! Never did the Gord I knew and loved have such ..."

Gord noted the uncertainty, seeing too the tiredness that Leda could not hide, the strain etched on her face. Not least from her stressful journey, she

too had recently undergone much. In answer to her statement, though, the young champion said only, "I have changed and experienced change in the last year, but I am still who I was."

Leda shook her head, making her long, platinum tresses ripple. "Perhaps you are actually who you claim to be; but you are not the same one I left, for you now have within you .. ."

"An inescapable charge and a desire to succeed. Let that suffice," Gord interjected. "This is no fit place for us to be reunited, yet I am loath to move elsewhere until we speak further," he said to her, giving her a look and a smile that said far more than words could. Gord stooped to retrieve Courflamme as he moved closer.

The orb came up into a defensive position in a flash. "Stay back!" Leda commanded, uncertainty still plain in her tone. "Leave that blade where it lies for the time, and tell me who now approaches!"

He turned toward where Gellor labored to join them. The bard was moving as if he were knee-deep to water, but his pace was strong and certain. "That is my boon companion, Gellor, a troubador of Nyrond," Gord said to the drow priestess with a reassuring warmth. "He and I are both bound by the same oath to fight and defeat those who would loose the Ultimate Darkness on the multiverse."

"Stay, then, and we shall await his arrival," Leda told the young man firmly. She liked the distorted space no more than Gord, but determination made it bearable. Leda was torn between suspicious fear and the desire to throw herself into Gord's arms. She controlled herself with a conscious effort, willing her knees not to tremble. The feelings that had been just below the surface washed across her in a surge.

How much she had given up in parting from him there that day in the Flanaess, consigning herself to dwell in the horrid reaches of the Abyss, the sacrifice, the emptiness and the pain and all the rest she had endured came near to sweeping over the little dark elven woman. She had been strong, determined, able to endure the imprisonment because she thought it permanent, forever. Now her lost love, Gord, was here ... or was he? There was still the possibility that it was a trick — some ruse devised by the filthy cambion, Iuz. And even if it was actually Gord, was he the same Gord? Did he still love her as she adored him? And if all were as she hoped, how long

would it be before the malice of this place, the evil weavings of demons and devils, parted them again? She swayed, and the light around her seemed to dim.

"Leda?" Gord said, holding her slender, mall-clad form to him as if she were an infant. Without warning Leda had suddenly fainted, and he had had to move as quick as a cat to catch the thing she had held and to keep her from falling to the caustic stuff that was the all-in-all of the Soulless Sounding. "Are you hurt? 111?"

"The Eye . . ." she managed to whisper, clutching feebly at it where it lay in Gord's left hand.

"It is safe. You can have it back as soon as you're recovered sufficiently to hold it. Never mind the damned thing!" Gord said crossly. "It's not important. You are!"

The strength of his arm, the sound of his voice, comforted Leda. At last she was sure it was Gord. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him quickly , then fell back, sobbing.

"Ah, hush . . . hush, now," Gord said soothingly, rocking the slight form as he spoke. Although couldn't know for certain just why she was so wracked, the emotion filling Gord was enough to enable him to share the pain and joy of the moment, to understand and be tender. "There will be no separation again — ever. Not as long as I live and you live, Leda my one love." He gently stroked her cheek caressed her hair as he soothed her, and Leda's crying diminished slowly.

Leda regained her composure but didn't move unnecessarily, content to have Gord hold her. Drawing herself as close as their armor would allow, and clasping him around his neck again, the dark elven girl asked, "But how came you to be in this forsaken place?"

"I am pouring out my heart in love to her, and this hard-hearted drow can only interrogate me in return," Gord responded with mock severity but not a little hurt.

"Forgive me, dearest one," Leda said, giving him a little kiss. "You see, I am consigned to this horrid sphere, but not you! I thought never to see you again, let alone to find you wandering through this accursed sink they call

the Soulless Sounding. . . ." Then something else struck her. "How is it that you traverse this place? That you can survive in it is miraculous!"

Smiling, Gord returned her kiss with more fervor than was suggested by the situation. Finally he stopped and answered her queries. "The charge I have been given enables it, Leda. I have grown stronger, been imbued with power, too. Gellor and I now trek the Abyss — even the whole of the netherworlds if need be — to accomplish our purpose!"

"Which is ... ?"

Before Gord could say anything to that, the oneeyed bard arrived. "I don't mean to intrude," he harrumphed with a suppressed smile, "yet I fear I must. For one thing, I can't take much more of this place — I should have thought both of you would feel the same, too! For another, we stand exposed to any others who might also be plying this disgusting channel, and any capable of traversing it pose some threat to us. . . . So, Gord, this is none other than the Leda you have so often spoken of?" the grizzled veteran added suavely, approval in his glance as he smiled fully at the ebon-skinned elven priestess.

"And you must be none other then Gellor, a name Gord spoke often during our adventures together," Leda responded as she released her hold on Gord and stood erect. She was now composed and fully able. "I agree that we should tarry here no longer, although I think that none likely to pass would dare to trouble us," she concluded with confidence in her tone and bearing.

"Well, no need for me to make introductions," Gord said. "Here," he added, proffering the sphere to Leda as he reached for his own sword. "I think this is the object which makes you feel so invulnerable here. As for me, I'll feel easier holding Courflamme."

"That is a great and puissant relic of demonkind!"

Gellor gasped as his attention was drawn to the smoky-hued globe.

"Most observant, troubador," Leda responded, slipping the object into its protective covering. "The ocular you use in place of your natural eye . . ."

"Enables me to see much. That, and the other abilities I have recently gained, tell me that what you have there can be nothing other than the infamous Eye of Deceptionf"

Gord turned and stared at the slight priestess as she held the rune-worked bag. "Is what he says true? Do you have the greatest prize of Graz'zt there?"

"That is my affair," she snapped back. "What business of yours might it be if it were?" Then she was struck by the suddenness of their meeting, the change in Gord's aura and manner, the steel evident in his resolve to do whatever he was in the nethersphere to do. Perhaps she had been mistaken. People changed — even dark elven people, she had to admit to herself. Was his being here nothing more than another sort of trick after all? "You are Gord, but what is your real reason for being here?" Leda asked with measured words. "Have you come merely after this?"

"So many questions, so much doubt," Gord said sadly. "I am here to do but one thing. I am to locate each of the Theorparts, take them, and join the three fractions into a whole again." He saw the stunned look on Leda's face, but he forged on regardless. "It is wonderful to be with you again. I want you to come with Gellor and me in this quest Should you decline, ask instead that I go to some other place with you, I would have to refuse. Not because you are not the most precious thing to me, sweet love. The whole of the cosmos rests upon my poor, inadequate abilities. The ancient artifact of Evil must be conjoined, Tharizdun must be loosed, and I — we, perhaps — must face the vilest one and defeat him."

"Oh, Gord ..." Leda's large eyes were huge in wonder and fear at his words. "Such a thing .. . such is not possible. We're too small . . . too weak Why, the greatest of evils could crush the three of us in one hand," she whispered, as if afraid that Tharizdun would hear her speak and come then and there.

"Think again, girl." Gord's tone was harsh, the words sharp. "Recall your failure to recognize me. I am no puny opponent, this blade no mere toad-sticker. There is but one being alive to contend with Tharizdun. I am told it's me, and I choose to accept that at its face. Now, Leda, will you join me — Gellor and me?"

"We could use that thing's magic well, I think" the bard told her by way of encouragement, "and your assistance, too."

"But. . . my duties. I said to Vuron that I'd hasten with the Eye so that it could be used in defense — Graz'zt is ringed by his foes!" Leda concluded almost hysterically.

Gord was filled with a fury that made his eyes fierce and his veins stand out. "Vuron? I'll skewer him on this point as if he were a toad and this a sticker!" he snapped in a rising voice. "As for Graz'zt, I give not a fart in the breeze for him and all that is his. Should he get in the way of my path, I'll slay him too, demonking or no — perhaps I should make a point of doing that now!" He turned away, spat, then turned back and glared at Leda. "Do you serve demons still? If so, then begone!"

"Wait!" the level-headed Gellor said.

Leda was already turning back. At Gord's harsh statements, she had spun on one little heel and started away. Then she thought better of it. She was hurt that he could think so of her, speak so degradingly. "You are jealous!" she cried.

"Jealous? I'll show you what that means. Give me that cursed bag with Graz'zt's little toy in it! Hand it to me now! I'll personally take it to him. He'll get that, and more, from me."

"Easy, my young friend," Gellor counseled, grabbing Gord by his arm to keep him from brandishing Courflamme. "You might take off my head — or hers — with such wild gesticulations of that razor-edged brand of yours." Gord subsided a bit at that. "Better," the one-eyed troubador said soothingly, "much better. Give the lass a chance to catch her breath, take this all in. She came to this bedamned place for as good a cause as that which we now seek to fulfill. If Leda has some difficulty in so sudden a change, allow her Just a bit to make the adjustment, Gord. My rede is that this pretty little drow loves only one thing more than doing what's right — and that one thing's you."

Gord looked uncertainly from Gellor's face to Leda's. "I.. ." he started, then trailed off. "You . . ."

"So articulate," Leda said, smiling up at him. Gord was barely five and a half feet tall in his boots, but Leda was a scant five feet tall. Nevertheless, she felt as tall as he at the moment. "So powerful and manly in his ire," she continued. Now Leda felt better, for she understood Gord's actions fully. "I am swept off my poor feet, sir. Pray, do allow me to accompany you on this fell quest."

"Now you leave off, lass." Gellor said. Although the dark elf was no doubt a highly capable person, one skilled in the use of words, magics, and

weaponplay too, the troubador felt easy enough speaking to her thus. He took an instant liking to Leda, trusted her, and felt almost as if she were a daughter, though Gellor had never had any children that he knew of. "Don't play with the poor fool so. He is a great and Just champion, a foe to be reckoned with. He's poor at this sort of thing, though, and you have him at a great disadvantage at this moment. Just be gentle now," he admonished.

"Hmmm," Leda answered, looking from Gord's flushed and stony face to the lined, weathered features of the bard. "You are a good man and wise," Leda said to Gellor seriously. "I take your meaning." She looked back at Gord and smiled. "I am sorry, dear one. I got carried away by the press, the suddenness of all this, just as you did. Of course I will be with you, stand by your side. What more could I ask?"

Gord relaxed visibly, and his grim look changed to one of happiness. "Come on then, Leda! Let's get out of this place — though I suspect wherever else we land will be scarcely less oppressive. We seek out the nearest part of the evil relic."

"What of Graz'zt? He isn't so bad as those who fight against him. He has been fair to me."

"Don't start with that again," the young champion nearly snarled, taking Leda by one small hand and dragging her along. "Where is the place which will lead us to him? I'll wrest the first of the Theorparts from his weird paws!"

Knowing argument was fruitless, Leda simply pointed. "There, along that twisting passage there," she said to Gord. "Even I can sense the proximity of a Theorpart that way."

"She speaks true," Gellor said when he noted Gord hesitating. "The closest of the three portions lies but a little way off there."

"It is not held by Graz'zt," Gord protested.

"What matter? One is like another, and we are here to get the triple key quickly and from whatever hand should try to hold each part Graz'zt's or any other, it matters naught." With that the troubador set off on his own, not waiting for further discussion.

Leda moved to Gord's side. "Come on, my champion. We can't leave our companion to face the enemy by himself." Gord grunted in a disconsolate

manner but moved along the way Gellor was following. Leda spoke no further, allowing them to travel the short distance in silence. She wanted to turn back to carry the Eye of Deception back to Graz'zt where he waited in his massive palace. But she couldn't — she knew that. If she did, Gord would follow her to Mezzafgraduun. There would be a terrible fight. Graz'zt would lose, even with the Eye and a thousand demons to assist him, of that Leda felt sure. Somehow Gord and Gellor would triumph, but they would be sorely hurt in the process.

All of that couldn't be allowed to happen. Still, Graz'zt needed the Eye. He would lose the Theorpart soon enough, but the Eye .... Perhaps the other two Theorparts, If Gord and Gellor could obtain them, would draw the third one from his possession. Then he would survive. With the Eye of Deception at his command, Graz'zt would scatter his diverse opponents, all of them bereft of any power to match that which the ebon demonking would wield through the Eye. Gone would be his dream of an empire commanding the netherrealms and stretching into many material planes and probabilities, true. But he would still have his existence.

Why did she care about the massive demon monarch? No time to consider that fully now. Suffice to let it go as merely a case of Graz'zt being a lesser evil than most of the other dwellers in the Abyss. Vuron as well, but in a different way. The demonking was, after all, the patron of her race, as dark of complexion as Leda herself and all drow, and he had made her a noble of his court, treated her well, been . . . Never mind.

What would Eclavdra have done had she survived instead of she, Leda, a mere clone, triumphing through the aid of Vuron? It was a fair question, she thought, for Eclavdra was another self, one dead and still living within Leda too. Eclavdra would have tried to make Graz'zt her pawn; and at this juncture she would have done exactly as Leda was doing, only for far different motives. No — that wasn't exactly true. Eclavdra would not have desired to return the Eye of Deception to the demonking. She would have desired it for herself, to keep the evil thing and utilize its powers to further her own ends.

"Where will we emerge?" Gellor asked. Interrupting Leda's reverie. The bard was staring at the murky place that was the gateway to a tier of the Abyss. It led to no great strata, only to a large and wild layer, but a place of much importance nonetheless.

"Beyond lies iyondagur, three hundred ninety-ninth tier of the Abyss," Leda said woodenly. "It is a place of nine regions, and it accesses not only the levels above and below it"

"I know," Gord said, drawing from the inner knowledge that had been imbued in his mind by the great ones of Balance. "Iyondagur leads also to the three hundred and sixty-sixth stratum of demonsrealm."

"What sort of place is this, Leda?" Gellor asked as the three stood at the brink of the portal. "Gord and I have implanted knowledge of much of the sphere, but fine details are not available. I sense that the Theorpart nearby is the Initiator, and that it is strongly held by both demons and daemons. . ."

"Iyondagur's nine regions are held by the Abat-dolor, bard," the dark elf told him readily enough. "They are independent ones, the nine clans of pain, and bow to no master other than their own."

"Who commands them?" asked Gord with an urgency that he couldn't conceal. It was, after all a tight spot they were in. Despite confidence, great inner powers, armor, weapons, the task at hand was monumental. To wrest a Theorpart from its wielder was sufficient to make any great champion blench. When tens of thousands of hostile demon guards were added to the equation, the task became something on the order of incredible impossibility. Impossible and incredible, that is, until one factored in the rest of the disparate components. Courflamme's true powers were still unknown, but Gord thought that they were sufficient to overmatch a single Theorpart. They had already proved that a thousand great demon-brutes and demon-beasts could not overwhelm them. Gellor's magic from the kanteel and the work of his own sword were sufficient to withstand assault — for a time, at least.

Now fortune had thrown Leda and the Eye of Deception into the equation. By herself, the gorgeous little drow priestess was the equal of most demons. Perhaps even one of the princes might demur at facing Leda in single combat, Gord mused. She too had grown stronger during the time they had been in separate worlds. Just as he was unreadable when he held Courflamme, so too was Leda. Perhaps it was an effect of the Eye; he wasn't sure. Gord only knew that her innermost force was shielded from any probing, and that shielding was strong — very, very strong! If Leda would employ the artifact she held on their behalf, perhaps the three of them could

actually manage to openly confront an entire horde of demonkind and defeat them all. Perhaps. ... It was a big "if", and Gord preferred to add to the weight of their force in as many ways as possible to ensure success immediately. Faltering and failure initially would mean the enemy would have warning, time to prepare, and heart to resist more strongly.

"The Abat-dolor have nine lords over them," Leda said without looking directly at Gord. "There is also a great one who rules the nine. . . ."

"The Abat-dolor?" Gellor asked. "I cannot recall ever learning of such demons as that race."

"Graz'zt is one," Leda finally admitted.

Chapter 7

THE SOULLESS SOUNDING PIERCED the very heart of iyondagur, to the place where the ruler of the realm dwelled. When Leda informed him and Gellor of what the Abat-dolor were, what their heritage was, Gord didn't hesitate longer. Taking the dark elfs arm and motioning to Gellor, the young champion stepped out of the channel and onto the tier of the ebon race of humanlike demons. "I will take the lead in any discourse," Gord told his companions. "Follow what I say — especially you, my love. These demons will know who you are, I think."

"Oh yes, that they will," Leda confirmed. "Elazalag holds great enmity for my . . . King Graz'zt."

Gord shrugged, then smiled thinly. "So much the better, I think." They emerged from the distorted passage just then and found themselves squarely in the middle of a great plaza. "And what is this?" he asked Leda as he peered around at the frowning facades of hewn stone blocks that hedged the irregularly shaped area. -

"This is the outer courtyard of Elazalag"s fortress, Gord. The Sounding conveys only important visitors or great foes to iyondagur. The leader of the Abatdolor clans desires to welcome either properly."

"I see the committee of greetings," Gellor noted dryly as squads of obsidian-skinned demons suddenly sprang into view along the parapets that topped the walls of the square.

The Abat-dolor much resembled humankind, or drow, although these demons were taller than elves or men. It was difficult to tell at a distance, but Gord estimated that each of the guards was seven or eight feet tall. The metallic sheen of polished red bronze highlighted each indIvidual soldier around the battlements. Helm, cuirass, and a full panoply of plate armor bedecked each of these warriors of the Abyss. Most were armed as would be human soldiers, with swords, spears, and thick-stocked arbalests. Some, though, were manning dark tubes, things that they swiveled to point at the three intruders in their midst, while others of these cylinders were being aimed at the air above them.

"The guards will not attack until ordered," Leda assured her companions, noting the worried looks both men wore as they observed the warlike

preparations surrounding them.

"What manner of arms are those long pipes?" the bard asked.

"Weapons of great potency and last resort," Leda supplied. "Those tubes discharge things taken from the antisphere. Gaining such material is dangerous and costly, so Elazalag herself will order the release, and then only in extremis. The stuff is deadly. If we are caught by a stream of it, we will be destroyed in a great implosion as the negative stuff drains us away to nothingness."

Gord was as interested in her statement about the ruler of iyondagur being female as he was in Leda's explanation of the powers of the tubes. Before he could inquire further, though, there was a booming noise as if iron rods were being pounded on a hollow floor of wood, and immediately thereafter came a raucous hooting as if multitoned horns of deep timbre and high tone were sounded, en masse, and by the lungs of giants. The very stones shook at the blasts, and thinking was near impossible. No sound could be heard above the noise. Then a deeper grumbling roar managed to penetrate the horns' cacophony. Gord turned and saw a massive portcullis being raised simultaneously with the lowering of what could only be a solid stone drawbridge.

"These demons are most rapid in their preparations," Gellor said. His voice sounded loudly in the now still square. "And now comes the herald!"

Through the opening in the walls around them rode a massive Abat-dolor. He was astride a demonbeast, a parody of a horse, a steed with eight thick legs and with a muzzle spiked as that of a black rhinoceros. "I thought the hippokeres was a savage monster. . . ." Gord said in uncertain voice.

"That it is," Leda replied. "Even these demons are able to capture and tame but a few of the smaller of their sort. They are demon-beasts which inhabit the tiers lower down."

"And the rider?"

"Elazalag"s herald and chief warrior, the Lord Nisroch, Gord. They are uncertain of who and what we are, I see," she added in a near-whisper. "The Nine Chevaliers accompany Nisroch. and the great chariot behind them bears Princess Elazalag herself." She was about to say something further, but the stentorian bellow of the demon-herald's voice cut Leda short.

"Upon your bellies in fear of lethal Elazalag and her rage!" commanded the bellowing herald. Gellor inclined his upper body a fraction. Leda smiled as she cast her head slightly downward, as if to conceal her mirth. Gord stood absolutely still. Nisroch seemed not to notice the failure on the part of all three to obey. Instead the big demon went on with his bellowing. "Helpless sacrifices to our ruler's displeasure, you have the space of a hundred beats of your heart to state your last words. You, drow bitch who yaps at Graz'zt's heels! Cry out why you give yourself and the lives of the human and . . ." The herald trailed off for but a split-second, confused at what to call Gord. He was quick to pick up again, saying ". . . the little cockroach trembling behind a mask of dweomers."

Before Leda could respond in any fashion, Gord strode one pace forward. "I, cockroach though I am, speak for all three here." There was mockery in his tone, a Jape at the vaunted herald of the princess of the Abat-dolor for his obvious inability to discern Just who and what Gord was. "You address my associates as Lord and Lady, demon, and 'Sir' will suffice for me. We have come to offer you the opportunity of defeating your foes."

As if that were a cue, the spike-encrusted chariot of black adamantite came up with a rumble and a clank the three monstrous hippokeres drawing it snarling and snorting as the iron chains that controlled them were yanked back to force star-pointed bits into the beasts' metal-hard mouths. Riding alone in the vehicle was a smaller, elegantly armored female Abat-dolor, quite beautiful as far as Gord could tell, what with the coif of dark chainmail and adamantite helmet shielding much of the demon princess's face from view, just as the hard plates of that metal hid her form. She was smaller than the herald or the guards, but still the demoness was fully seven feet tall, and her voice sounded nearly as loud as that of Nisroch. "Liar and spy! I claim your life for my own!" The contralto voice of Elazalag rang out over the hushed space.

Gord never flinched as the demoness's arm swung forward, and the chain-borne star of wickedly sharp hooks lashed down at him with deadly speed and force. Some inner sense told him that this was no real threat. The shadow armor took the force of the adamantite chain and curved knives, deflecting and absorbing the blow. It was as if nothing had struck him, nothing at all. There was a gasp from Leda; Gellor grunted, and then a

susurration of similar sounds of amazement came from the encircling demons.

"I am no liar, no spy," said Gord evenly, "and I can help you vanquish the enemy now invading this place as easily as my armor turned away your mighty blow. Mistress of the Abat-dolor."

There was a basso curse from Nisroch and the sound of weapons being drawn as herald and demon knights unsheathed their blades. There was no doubt that the small fellow's bland statement and calm were insults of the most heinous sort, and they would teach the outlander — human or otherwise — what it meant to denigrate the greatest of demon races! Elazalag herself stopped them from such folly. "Hold, Nisroch! Cease, guards! Are you boorixtroi? This is not an opponent for such as you to face," the demoness added as she stared hard at Gord. "Withdraw to the gate," Elazalag commanded. "I will remain alone to treat with these strangers."

Nisroch's eyes burned with green fire as he hesitated, glaring at the three interlopers. The demon was obviously shamed and humiliated. The nine great Chevaliers of the Abat-dolor court likewise hesitated, knotting closely behind the herald. Then the warriors saw their princess's own anger. It was directed at them. Nisroch dropped his gaze, bowed, and turned his mount. For a minute, normal speech was impossible over the thunder of the hippokeres' iron hooves as their riders spurred them back to the gateway.

"Very wise, ruler of the Abat-dolor," Gord said when the din had subsided. He had not taken his own eyes from the tall demoness. "One thing more, though, Princess Elazalag. Please don't try to spray us with discharges of negativity from your black tubes surrounding us. It won't work, and I would then have to exact revenge."

"Just who and what are you?" the six-fingered demoness asked. "That you know the nature of our defenses is unremarkable. Graz'zt's little drow has certainty informed you of such. But you are not right, somehow — neither man nor demon, despite the aura of dark chaos which enwraps you."

"Does it really matter who I am. If I can aid the Abat-dolor in retaining their land and freedom and lives?" Gord said. He expected no answer, and the young champion of Balance waited, for none. "I care nothing for you and your kind, of course. The enemy who threatens you happens to be my

foe, too. I plan to destroy that enemy's power, and in the process your precious iyondagur will be cleansed of invaders. You will continue to rule, and my companions and I will be gone."

"Run back to the dungheap's stronghold, perhaps? Or do you seek to cozen me into some trap?" Elazalag shot back "It was just brought to my attention that my realm has been invaded. You three, then, must either be agents of Graz'zt or of the invaders. Either case is sufficient to condemn you to whatever slow death I can devise!"

"Please come here, Lady Leda," Gord said with a clear voice, still keeping his eyes fixed on the demoness. The dark elf stepped beside him hesitantly. "Thank you," Gord said, turning and flashing a warm smile at Leda. "Please be so kind as to display to the princess of the Abat-dolor what it is you hold ready."

For a moment Leda wanted to run away. To do that she would have to use the Eye first, however. Play its forces upon Gord and the rotten Elazalag. then utilize its power to move from the courtyard back to the Soulless Sounding. This object was Graz'zt's by all rights, and neither Gord nor the demon princess could claim otherwise. While such thoughts flashed through her mind, Leda stepped another pace forward, so that she stood just slightly ahead of the gray-eyed man clad in shadow armor and elfin mail.

As she drew the Eye of Deception from its enchanted covering, dark energies seemed to play back and forth between the smoke-colored sphere and the pommel of Courflamme, sheathed at Gord's left hip and near to Leda. Ignoring her own thoughts and desires, heedless of the forces that darted round, the drow priestess lifted the sphere with her right hand. presenting its pupil-like spot to Elazalag, allowing the demoness ruler of the Abat-dolor to view the fell thing from the most undesirable perspective — its business end, as it were. Then Leda spoke without direction from Gord or permission from this royal demoness.

"This, Elazalag of the Abat-dolor, Is just what it seems. I hold the Eye of Deception."

The demon princess's face paled to ashen hue upon seeing the glowing pupil of the thing. Elazalag knew all too well what terrible powers the wielder of the device could loose. "You may encase it again . . . Lady Eclavdra." The noble Abat-dolor managed to remain outwardly calm

despite the very real threat — which she read in the draw's eyes, not in the greatest artifact of demon-power known to the Abyss. "Has your master sent you here to slay me? Or to serve against the incursions of my foes — and his?"

It was Gord who interjected before Leda could make any reply. "The lady does not serve Graz'zt any longer. Neither do I or my other companion, of course. We three are as one in serving a greater master. I tell you freely and openly, that cause is one which you and all of your demonfolk will gladly embrace, too."

"Really?" Elazalag sneered, her beautiful features distorting into true demoniacal form as she did so. The transformation was brief, but it helped remind Gord of what he faced. "Now I know you for a double liar, mankin. Despite the wildness of evils which enwraps you, I deem you an agent of the Hells and a friend of daemons!"

"And if you receive from me the Eye of Deception?"

Leda gasped aloud at Gord's words. Never would she permit this demoness to hold the Eye — not even if her love commanded it! As she was about to renounce such a thing he touched her shoulder, lightly, with a loving caress as would a man giving comfort to his own mate. Leda found herself unable to voice a protest, and then the wash of tenderness from Gord's touch flowed down her body, and for a moment she forgot the thought of it.

Elazalag's face stiffened into an unreadable mask. She stretched forth her hand from her platform. "Give me the thing, and then I will consider your words," she said without inflection.

"Not quite so easily or quickly," Gord countered. "There is only scant time for discourse, but I fear we must spend precious minutes doing so, you and I. It would be appropriate to invite us all into your castle immediately, so that we can arrange the details of the bargain."

"Bargain?"

"Yes. A bargain. Princess Elazalag. You and your Abat-dolor will accompany the three of us against the invaders. I will defeat their chief lords, strip them of their power. Thereafter I will reward you for your assistance in the matter with the gift of the Eye of Deception." As he told

that to the tall demoness, Gord had shifted his position slightly, unnoticeably. At the last word he suddenly drew forth Courflamme. It was a motion too fast for even a demon's eye to follow. To the onlooking guards and soldiers it appeared only as if he drew and held the weapon forth before him as if in offering it to their ruler. In actuality, Gord touched Elazalag's open hand with the flat of Courflamme's blade in the process.

The contact with the strange blade of mixed crystal and jet sent a jolt into the demon princess's brain. freezing her for a split-second, then warming her much as Gord's touch had quelled the rebellion within Leda. It also brought Elazalag knowledge. Before her was one now eternal, a warrior once human, now one who fought against whatever forces might upset the balance of the multiverse. Implacable foe, unyielding Judge, indomitable in pursuit of his cause. All were true, and true as well were his words regarding the bargain. He cared naught for the Eye of Deception, not if his first opponents — and the deadly enemies of her and her demonfolk — were dealt with as he would have them done.

The sword, his weapon, was an instrument of power whose potential far outweighed the force of the Abyssal artifact he offered. For a moment Elazalag considered gaining the blade as well, then dismissed the idea. One touch told her that it was not a weapon that any demon could trust. The thing would turn, drink her energy, and serve only Balance. "Come into my chariot," the demoness said with a gesture indicating all three. "You are my guests for a brief stay — very brief! My council will already be there when we arrive."

A handful of male and female Abat-dolor were awaiting them in a large, high-vaulted chamber, just as Elazalag had stated. Nisroch was there, for he was both herald and thegn of the demon clans. Only three of the other lords of the Abat-dolor's nine clans were there, along with one lady chieftainess and a female named Mycortte, both chamberlain and vice-princess, it seemed, the one who ruled in Elazalag's name when the leader of the iyondagur's nine regions was away. Gord was surprised at such trust, but it was nothing he tarried upon. Too many other matters pressed. He had to listen to a series of tirades against all the rest of the netherworld, demonkind, and Graz'zt. The last was the principal target the great demonking whose realm had been vast, but to whom these folk had never bowed. Yes, he was of their race, but. . .

Once, it seemed, the lands held by the Abat-dolor had included both iyondagur and Mezzafgraduun, now the demesne of Graz'zt; thus, the contiguity between the seemingly widely separated three hundred and ninety-ninth tier and the great three hundred and sixty-sixth stratum. The joint realm was ruled by Graz'zt and Elazalag, his consort. Thirteen clans of the Abat-dolor dwelled on the two layers of the diverse realm, and many other sorts of demonkind were subject to the two rulers.

Then somehow the ancient of witches, Iggwilv, entered the Abyss, came to Graz'zt in his palace on Mezzafgraduun, and soon won favor with the demonking. By wiles and deceit Iggwilv separated him from Elazalag, the clans of Abat-dolor from their union. The ambitions of the ebon demonking and his attitudes alienated all but four of the clans from him, but there were many ambitious nobles of other races flocking around Graz'zt and the powerful witch; many sorts of lesser demon races to subjugate, enlist, enslave.

Soon Graz'zt was waging a great battle against the mightiest of the other demonkings, expanding his lands and dreaming of a vast empire. Iggwilv too had great aspirations, and the witch duped Graz'zt into a position which cost the demon much.

In the course of all that, a time covering a score or more decades, the enmity and dispute between Elazalag and the majority of the Abat-dolor versus Graz'zt and his empire of mongrel sort deepened and became one of open hostility. Upon the humiliation of Graz'zt and his forced confinement to his own realm in the Abyss, Elazalag had attempted to mend the rift; she claimed before Gord and his two companions that she had been willing to sacrifice her personal feelings for the betterment of the Abat-dolor. The young champion doubted that, thinking that the demoness thought to use the situation to increase her own stature while Graz'zt was down. He said nothing, of course.

Vuron was named as a culprit, too, by the assembled demons who ruled iyondagur. His machinations, personal ambitions, and hatred for Elazalag kept Graz'zt from reuniting the clans and territories of the Abat-dolor. Because Leda (whom these demons called Eclavdra because they knew nothing of the battle between the drow and her clone, and of the defeat of Eclavdra by the twin, Leda) was a confidant and advisor of the ebon demonking, and because Vuron's favor of her was well known by them, the

princess demanded that Leda be held as hostage until the Eye of Deception was in Elazalag's hands.

"You are as false as any of your ilk" Gord answered with a ring of steel in his voice after that demand. "Your lie, your plan too, are as open to me as a sheet of parchment laid on this table before me." Elazalag snapped her mind closed at that, but Gord used his own mental force to prize open the demoness's thought barriers, trampling them down and stalking where he would in her brain. "You see? No thought of yours, no hidden motive of any of you, is not subject to my scrutiny and understanding."

Leda couldn't restrain herself upon hearing that. "What did the vile whore intend for me, Gord?"

"The great and noble princess of the Abat-dolor would confine you, gain the Eye, and then force Graz'zt here to her. To regain any of the evil artifact's powers again, Elazalag planned to have him torture you to death as slowly as possible."

"That.. . that-"

"No matter. Her plans are changed. What was considered is of no import now," Gord told the dark elf firmly. "Now, Princess, I will tell you what you and your subjects must do in order to gain the Eye of Deception. Remember, I care nothing about Graz'zt, your disputes, or the Abat-dolor. If I fall, your foes will have the Eye and the sword I bear . , . plus the relic they plan to destroy all of you with, unless you become their slaves forever. If I succeed, your domain is again firmly in your grasp, and one way or another Graz'zt will be stripped of his relic soon thereafter, too. Then, noble Elazalag, the fate of him and the whole of your kind will rest squarely with you."

"I attend your words with utmost diligence, and so do all my faithful vassals," the demoness added, then swept a meaningful glare over those of her subjects who were present.

Gord stated exactly what was to be done. The foes here were relatively few in number, relying on the power of the Theorpart they bore to win through. No more than about one hundred thousand demons and triple that number of other netherbeings now tramped across the lands of iyondagur.

"The bulk of the horde which now threatens your realm, Elazalag, Is composed of daemons and cacodaemons, and all the force is led by their tyrant,

Infestix."

"Just how do you happen to know all this?" The demand was boomed by Nisroch.

That was something Leda was wondering as well. Subjective time in passage through the Soulless Sounding was distorted, so that what seemed an hour or two was a full day. That meant that she had been away from Vuron and the army he commanded for no more than two or three days, measured by Oerth standards. And Gord had been in the Sounding at the same time — so how could he know what had transpired during that time?

As the demon princess and all of her Abat-dolor council peered intently at the young champion, awaiting his response to the query, Leda interjected, "It is passing strange, Gord, that so much is known to you. . . ." The sudden shift in position of Elazalag, the electric shock that seemed to be transmitted to the demons, brought a flush to the dark elven priestess. Immediately, she knew she should not have used Gord's name. "Oh!" Leda exclaimed. "I didn't mean to . . ." And then she fell silent, for any further words would simply compound her error.

"It is nothing," Gord said, not bothering to attempt a lengthy discussion of the matter. "My identity is no great secret, and soon enough it will be known far and wide throughout the sphere anyway."

"The slayer of demons!" hissed Mycortte. "He is in our hands!"

"Really?" The question came from Elazalag, and it brimmed with ironic mockery. Nisroch the herald bellowed laughter, and its tone underscored his princess's derision. "Cease!" Elazalag commanded. The demons fell silent.

"So, Gord of Cats, Player in Shadows, Elect of Balance — now I begin to understand. Even here in these backwaters of the Abyss we have heard of you and know of your purpose. Marked, you are, by every being in all the netherspheres."

"Not by demonkind."

"Not especially, no. None of the dwellers here care to be yoked by the shackled one . . . yet each lord here lusts after the powers of the Theorparts.

I would have one — all!"

Gord shook his head. "Would you, demoness? Then would you be marked for turmoil and destruction far more than I. Graz'zt has one and his whole realm is under siege, its king noar to losing all. Demogorgon held one for a brief time, and then the daemon master he must now serve took it. Iuz thinks he possesses a Theorpart — and so do Iggwilv, Zuggtmoy, and her brother Szhublox. Think on that," and Gord paused a moment to allow his words to sink in, be assessed by Elazalag. "Do you know I held one once and gave it over?"

"Yes," the demoness responded with a harsh hiss. "I know Vuron's part in that — and hers, too!" she spat, glaring at Leda.

"Blame me, or better still place no blame at all. That was written, I think long before any of us knew. Because I am now who I am, much is known to me that is hidden from you. Everything that concerns the three parts of the elder artifact, the lives and actions of those who would wield them. Is apparent to my mind."

"How can that be?" Nisroch demanded. The big demon was incredulous.

"How is it that I am known? Your fellow Abat-dolor there, Mycortte, recognized who I am when she heard my name, calling me by the epithet the slayer of demons'. True, I have ended the existence of many from the Abyss; but I have no particular vendetta against your sort. Most of demonkind merely cries out to be destroyed." His tone was so hard, the words so laden with menace, that all save the princess herself recoiled from the small man. Nisroch pulled back with a growl. Even Elazalag straightened in her big chair.

"I am known because there is a rede which says that when the Ultimate Darkness threatens, one will be there to fight against it. Now, because I have risen to become that champion, all who seek to bring the curse upon the multiverse search for me. Scrying and spell, crystal-gazing and slinking spy, augury and divination are aimed toward me. Small and great are the wards which are there to prevent that, yet these protections have been inadequate. That is no matter. What must be done will be done, and 1 think none can stop me until Tharizdun stands before me." As he said that, the atmosphere in the demon princess's chamber seemed to darken, become palpably threatening. Gord ignored it and went on.

"I am no judge of demonkind, yet it seems that as a race the Abat-dolor are more civilized, more like humankind, perhaps — and I mean that as no insult or belittlement," the young thief added with a small chuckle. That act seemed to break the tension among the demons, and a few actually laughed. "If united, your kind would be a true force in this sphere, and perhaps there have been those who labored clandestinely to prevent such a thing happening. I don't know. My mental foreknowledge and prescience tells me this: Infestix brings his Theorpart here to iyondagur in a decisive thrust against Graz'zt. He, the master of Hades, desires to enlist your war bands rather than contest with them. Thus reinforced, his horde will march upon Mezzafgraduun. Even now he comes toward this place, while the bulk of his forces, the hordes of Demogorgon and Mandrillagon, reinforced by a million or more conscripts from the netherspheres bowing to Infestix, throw themselves in waves upon Vuron's defense."

"We care nothing for Graz'zt!" The angry retort came from Nisroch.

"It is evident that you are shortsighted, then," Gord countered, looking squarely at Elazalag as he spoke. "Do you want to serve the ape-headed ones? Bow to a daemon overlord? Become pawns of Tharizdun?"

"No, never," the demoness said in reply. There was force but no anger in the rejection. "It would serve my kind well if Graz'zt regained his senses too, became my co-ruler again ..."

So, Gord thought with satisfaction, this demon princess actually has emotions not dissimilar to human ones. Elazalag cared for the demon king — as a being or as a sign of power and authority, what matter? The term "love" covered many thoughts, emotions, desires. "Then gather the warbands of the Abat-dolor now! We will confront the invaders."

"Only a half-dozen of the clans can get their forces here," Elazalag said. "The other three are already cut off and are of no use."

"No matter, Princess," Gord told the demoness. "All that is needed is a show of force sufficient to cause the invaders to concentrate their mass, and for Infestix to stay with the Theorpart to assure the quick victory of his hordes over the puny force of Abat-dolor daring to resist the will of Hades."

"Hades?" spat the Herald. "It is a garden, a sweetsmelling oasis filled with delicate — "

"Enough, Nisroch," commanded Elazalag. "All of us are aware of your disdain for the enemy, and we have better things to do than listen to expletives. So, Champion of Balance, what can a few thousand of my subjects do save die uselessly?"

"I think you can field more than a few thousand warriors," Gord responded. "You and your warbands will accompany us as we go to face the foe. Their soldiers will come against you, and the Abat-dolor must defend themselves, fight valiantly for some time — an hour, perhaps. During that time we will strike into the heart of the invaders' position, seek out the daemon who commands them, and wrest from him the relic he wields against you, the Abyss, and all the multiverse."

"And the Eye of Deception?"

"That, Princess, will be safe in Lady . . . Eclavdra's hands. It will be what enables us to penetrate to where Infestix lurks."

"Never was that object meant to counter such power as is within Initiator," Elazalag said with doubt in her deep, contralto voice.

It was Leda's turn to speak up. "Pardon, great Princess," the dark elf said with firmness, "but you do not take into account the might of the dweomers contained in the champion's sword. I have used the force of the Eye to try to examine the blade, and it is strong! So strong that the Eye cannot pierce its veil, gain any understanding of it."

"Then how . . . ?"

"It is as the Theorparts, Princess, and I have had time and reason to attempt the Eye's scrutiny upon Unbinder in the past. The weapon is the equal of any Theorpart . . . more than a match, perhaps. If the Eye of Deception is added to the weight of it, then Infestix is at a disadvantage."

"My warriors," the demoness said, looking at Gord again. "What will become of them?"

"How many can you field?"

"Perhaps fifty thousand or so from the six clans nearby — there is no time to round up all the outlying rovers, or there would be double that force. My own soldiers and guards constitute but a division, about twenty thousand."

Gord nodded with conviction. "Ample for our purposes, I assure you! It is not to be a protracted engagement, Elazalag. It is only necessary to make the daemon stand and fight for a little time. We will scythe through the so-called Lord of Death's ranks as if they were ripe stalks of wheat, pluck his fangs — the Theorpart — and leave him and his hordes to run howling in terror back whence they came."

"That is a pleasing thought," Nisroch growled. "The great daemon can flee safely back to his nest, of course; but the rest of his army will not have such a luxury. . ."

"Lord Gellor," Gord suggested, "Is the one to assist you with the disposition of your forces."

"That is so," the grizzled bard affirmed. "I have fought many such battles, albeit with slightly different sorts of troops." Even Nisroch chuckled at that. "Whilst you gather the warbands, let us examine maps of iyondagur to find the best ground to confront the invaders. They will be marching here, hoping to gam your surrender, conscript your Abat-dolor soldiers, and then thrust into Mezzafgraduun as a sword's point slides into the heart of a foe. Now, Princess Elazalag, I think the best position is likely to be near to your own . . ." And so Gellor went on, as the ebon-hued demons rushed to bring together their forces to face the invading horde led by the master daemon.

Chapter 8

"THE BLACK ONES gather against us, Most Foul."

"Dolt! Do you think I am blind? Stupid!"

The captain of the dreggal scouts stood trembling before Infestix, not daring to speak further.

"Well? Do you?"

"No — never. Most—"

Infestix shot forth his hand without warning, tapping the spidery dreggal on its spiky cranium with one gray, skeletal finger. The filthy-looking nail pierced the thing's head. The dreggal quivered, Its skin writhed as growths sprang forth from it, and then putrescence took it, and the former captain was an oozing pool of slimy decay at the daemon's feet. "I am not inclined to deal otherwise with incompetence," Infestix announced.

"It is fitting," agreed the group of Diseased Ones nearby.

"The Abat-dolor will not bend their necks to Us?" asked Infestix.

Brucilosu, currently the highest of the eight, didn't hesitate in responding to the query. "No, Master of Death, the fools resist for some reason. Why, I cannot guess, for they hate Graz'zt and— "

"It is because of some outside interference," Infestix snapped. The great daemon was pleased, despite the circumstances, for the chance to shame the highest of his lieutenants. Any one of them would supplant him in an instant if that were considered possible. Fair enough, then — he, Infestix, would see to it that each of them was cut down when any opportunity presented itself. This time it was Brucilosu's turn. "Some force of Balance is nearby, and that force bears with it a pair of trifling powers. This is what incited the black ones to resistance — and that will mean their immediate extinction, for I will bring Unbinder to bear upon them! Go now, all of you. Marshal the hordes for battle. We will roll over these little Abat-dolor. It must be done quickly. Do you hear? I want victory quickly!"

The eight daemons scurried off to see to the disposition of the four corps that comprised the horde which Infestix had brought to iyondagur. As soon as he had redressed things against Vuron, the Master of Hades could see that Graz'zt's toad would retreat to yet another defensive position. It would

be like that for too long a time — series after series of attack battle, withdrawal to yet another defensive position. Eventually the stupid demons under Demogorgon would grind the albino's force to powder. But by then, Iuz and his assorted freaks would possibly have cracked the main lines defending Mezzafgraduun, overwhelmed Graz'zt, and stolen the Theorpart — which was rightfully the prize of Infestix.

In the moment he thought out that line of possibility, the lord of daemons had determined to commit everything he could muster with no further delay. Infestix gathered his strongest assistants, brought Initiator's energies into play, and opened first one channel, then another, to the planes of the netherworld beyond the Abyssal tiers.

Dumalduns, daemons, and cacodaemons by the tens of thousands were thus swept into his ranks. Dreggals, even maelvis, were suddenly teeming there on the somber plain from which Vuron had but recently retreated. Then Demogorgon, Mandrillagon, and their demonlords felt new confidence. With a million fresh soldiers to send into the fray, the stupid monsters went willingly away to batter against the thin lines of defense. Oh yes! The demon fighters and netherworld soldiers would attack and die by the tens of thousands despite their vast superiority in numbers.

Hie albino turd still held a Theorpart, Infestix knew, although the Eye of Deception was elsewhere — exactly where, he could not discern. That bothered him but a little, for the thing was inconsequential compared to Initiator or either of its matching parts. What counted was pressure and swiftness of action.

The bi-headed folly would press upon Vuron, push the pale slug back and back. Would Vuron then draw troops from Graz'zt? No, that was not likely. The result could only be a drain of the defenders under Vuron, a weakening so great that there would be but a corps or two left. As for Demogorgon? He and his baboon-faced brother would be leading mere squads soon. A hundred or two hundred thousand should suffice to form the anvil to Infestix's hammer. Infestix would break off a flying force, an army of no great size compared to the masses usual to warfare in the Abyss. It would be most potent, though. Hand-picked by himself Fast fearsome, and fueled by Infestix's own will and the force of the Theorpart. If the Abat-dolor were compliant and accepted his yoke, so much the better, for they would add more fodder to his horde. If not, a hundred thousand of the six-fingers

would pose no obstacle to his march — not with the power of the relic's fraction in his hand.

Infestix knew that Vuron was fiddling with time in order to make good his flight. The ape-heads were too thick to understand the tactic, but not Infestix. In fact, he realized, two forces might benefit from the pastime, because Greater Mezzafgraduun's parts were interlinked with other places, especially iyondagur. So, with the force of two Theorparts working toward the mutability of the flow, chronology was altered to assist both the albino and Infestix.

Even as the wild throng thundered and broke upon defenses that Vuron had been able to prepare especially for Demogorgon's assault, so too did the master of daemons cross the intervening places to arrive in the heart of the lands of the Abat-dolor. With or without those demons, Infestix would then enter Mezzafgraduun prime, behind the thin shell of defense that Vuron attempted, behind the ring of resistance Graz'zt forged against Orcus and his minions, the dupes of Iuz and his lot. Before the weight of troops could be shifted, Vuron would be crushed between the hard place of Demogorgon and the rock of Infestix. Two Theorparts welded into one, and the demon armies were fatally compromised.

"King of Extinction ..." It was a fawning legate of the maelvis legions that comprised the center of the army. Infestix turned from his contemplation, nodding slightly. "The enemy are deploying before our advance — only a few divisions. Great Master, no more than a hundred thousand."

"As I expected. Attack them!"

"Ah ..." the centurion hesitated, then decided to huny to get it out. "There is a knot of foreign forces in the midst of the Abat-dolor host, my King. There is too a banner. ..."

"Out with it, clod! What are you saying?"

"I am informed by your Diseased Ones, Mighty Lord, that it is the standard of the ... Demiurge . . ?"

"What? Basiliv? So! That is the one who Balance has finally chosen!"

Infestix paused. That explained much. As the aural readings of neutrality shifted and flowed, it had become more and more difficult to discover

exactly what the meddling nothings were up to, who was bearing their accumulated force. For a time it had seemed as if some little part-human, a former thief and too-frequent thorn-prick known as Gord, was to wear the mantle of champion. Then all sign of the Demiurge had vanished from the field. Could Basiliv have managed that? Perhaps. . . . But did that entity fit the prophecy? Could Basiliv be the one destined to oppose Tharizdun? Very doubtful, and thus so much the better for Evil! The wise ones" of Balance had blundered!

"Tell me, maelvi, what powers does the Demiurge bear with him?"

"That is beyond me, King of Extinction," the creature gulped, "but the Lord Brucilosu did say you must be told that the Demiurge displays four dweomers of the elements — auras which are potent."

Infestix sneered. He knew well enough the tokens of the energy of the elemental spheres. In their proper places, each might be considered the equal of Graz'zt's vaunted Eye of Deception, perhaps. Here, the four together would be hardly greater than the Eye, and the latter's strength was but a tithe of the Theorpart he wielded. "Start the assault now! Inform my commanders that I will personally advance and deal with the Demiurge once the Abat-dolor scum are pinned."

"Yes, King," the maelvi cried, and sped away as quickly as he could. It was always a terrible thing to be the messenger to Infestix, and the quicker he was away, the less the probability of his being slain by the dreaded daemon.

Under the circumstances, it was perhaps understandable that the centurion didn't relate the Diseased Ones' warning — that their observations were somewhat clouded, and that the emanations might indicate some form of distortion, a trick That sort of intelligence often spelled death for the one relating it, and despite its malign and hateful nature, the maelvi prized its horrid existence above all else.

Abat-dolor cavalry posted on the wings prevented Infestix's horde from immediately encircling and surrounding the main body. The riders were mounted on hippokeres and vargrlneens. Though few in number, that made them formidable enough that it required some considerable time to drive them off. As the core of dreggals smashed into the demons' center, the other units in Infestix's horde closed and fixed the Abat-dolor where they were.

His own demon warriors followed the dreggals, while the other troops moved to encompass the outnumbered resistance. After watching the slaughter for a span, the lord of the netherspheres decided it was time to deal with the situation. His personal guards, the plagante, swept forth with their master in their midst.

"I see you there, Basiliv. You carry the Quadrate Pillars of . . ." Infestix suddenly broke off his mental challenge, allowing the telepathic shout to die in midsentence. What had been the image of the Demiurge had suddenly shifted to another. Not a stone's throw distant, and coming through his guards as if they were mere phantoms, was another one altogether.

Infestix knew that one well enough. It was the spawn of Rexfelis, the adventurer named Gord. In his hand was the sword that had sent Gravestone, the daemon's chief human agent, into oblivion — only the blade was worse now than it had been. Infestix could plainly see destruction dancing from its length in tongues of diamond and jet Flanking the small man were a drow female, in whose hands rested the Eye of Deception, and a man with a kanteel of druldic dweomer. The instrument was of nature, and its harmonies inimical to the netherlife. In its own right it was as potent a thing as the Eye was; yet neither of those things, nor the ones who bore them, caused the greatest of daemons concern. It was the small one with the long sword. . .'.

"You recognize me, worm-fornicator?"

"You should have been expunged as a babe!" Infestix snarled.

"You tried, didn't you? Too bad your tools were so inept, eh? If you had come against me personally, as you did later, then things would have been different."

The crash and roar of the battle seemed distant, dim. Even the melee at hand was taking place as if it were happening underwater. Motion was slow, sound muffled. Waves of silvery music swept forth from the troubador's little harp in patterns that Infestix could discern with a glance. They impacted upon his daemon guards, the demons and dreggals around them, and the notes pierced and slashed the netherbeings as if they were arrows and blades. Darts of energy spat forth from the Eye of Deception too, and where the maroon rays played, more destruction came to his protectors.

Infestix realized that the banter from his foe had been nothing but a distraction to allow the closing of the distance that had separated them.

"A clever ruse, you little weasel," Infestix grated. "So much the easier for me to send you to scream for mercy in my domain!" With that, the daemon brought up the malformed thing that was Initiator, the Theorpart, and willed an opening between it and the antispheres. From that channel would come the stuff of total nihility, and upon his adversary would it raven. The material form of the small human would be destroyed, but the soul he would reserve for his own amusement "Now eat death, man ling!" The Theorpart sent forth its lightless stream, but Infestix saw something other than what he expected, something that horrified the master of horrors.

The sword in Gord's hand suddenly shimmered and became two. A crystal blade sprang free from the dark and soared above as a faicon. The jet-black portion simply stretched forth to greet the beam of negativity, drink it, and devour the stuff of nihility. As if some leech feeding, the weapon drew the lightless stuff into its length, became greater, and began to glow with a radiance unknown even to the eyes of the greatest daemon.

"Courflamme thanks you for the refreshment," Gord said with a chuckle as he came, now almost within sword's point of the surprised Infestix.

Something warned the daemon not to try his attack any further. Instead, Infestix brought the Theorpart up to a defensive position over his maggoty head. There was a tinkling screech, and the glowing diamond-length of the crystalline portion of his adversary's strange sword went flying off as a quarrel skitters away after striking granite.

"Aha! Now half of your brand's potency is shattered, would-be champion," Infestix gloated. "Half a sword, half a man. That is but a half-fart's duration in a wind. Now let us see the defense against this!" As he shouted that to Gord, the daemon used Initiator to bring down a roaring column of pure energy upon the place his foe stood. Fractured, showing a crazing throughout its length, the diamond-bright blade still interposed itself between the stuff of consuming force. As its ebon twin had done, so too the crystal sword negated the energy — and at the same time that it absorbed the eye-searing brightness of the blast, the brand's damage was wiped away.

But not all of the energy could be stopped. Gord was bathed in a small part of the force. His being was assaulted, atoms assailed and nearly sundered. It took all of the distillation of powers granted to him to save himself from being blown to nothingness in an explosion that would have devastated iyondagur for a league around. Gord managed, but the drain was enough to bring him to his knees, eyes and ears trickling blood, nose streaming the crimson stuff.

Seeing his adversary in such a condition, Infestix leaped forward to slay Gord personally. The two halves of Courflamme saved him from simple slaughter at that moment Dark and bright blades leaped out, posing twin threats to the daemon, and the fiend Jumped back as quickly as he had sprung, defending himself with the Theorpart. Neither the jet nor the diamond portions of the sword would come near to Initiator, so the defense was effective.

"It is but a matter of time," hissed the daemon master in his moldery voice.

"But not as you assume," Gord countered. He used his last remaining force to restore his body, stand erect and ready himself to fight.

Infestix caused the Theorpart to metamorphose in his hand. It changed from a twisted thing of no particular purpose into a weird sort of pole arm. There was a haft with thin, axelike blades radiating from its head, and lower, leaflike tines with solid spurs at their base. As a spetum or ranseur, the daemon's weapon could catch and snap a sword blade in these latter projections. At its terminus was a foot-long spike. The thing was an axe-mace on the end of a short pike, with holding and disarming capability included. It would be very effective, too, if used at the right distance by a very strong wielder against an incautious opponent.

"No?" Infestix mocked. "Let us see how you manage play with me now, manling! You fight the master now, not the petty servant as you did when you bested Gravestone."

The daemon thrust the weapon at Gord, spun its length with his long arms, then slashed in a horizontal arc. Gord weaved away from the stabbing attack, then had to dance backward as quickly as he could from the long sweep of the glittering edges of the thing. The touch of its pointed end sent

showers of fiery sparks flying from the shadow armor that protected his chest, and that brief kiss knocked the young champion off his feet.

It was lucky for Gord that the Theorpart-weapon was an unwieldy instrument. Had it been shorter, Infestix might have been able to deal the coup de grace then and there. By the time the daemon could bring the head of the weapon around and up to strike, though, his adversary had recovered enough to roll aside when the weighty axe blades came down. Infestix levered the thing up and into position immediately, but that allowed Gord time to clamber back into a crouch, and now he held the rejoined Courflamme before him. "Good, but not great, corpselover," he taunted.

What had Just transpired had given the daemon confidence, and Infestix readied his next attack with a leering look of anticipatory delight on his cadaverous visage. He had been unsure of exactly what would happen when he willed Initiator into a weapon. But the Theorpart had responded instantly, and the instrument he now grasped at the ready was a strange and devastating thing of death. As he moved it, became more accustomed to it, Infestix found it light, responsive, almost alive. This time he would be quicker, more exact, and the heart of the human opposing him would be his to devour.

It was all Leda could manage to keep the Eye of Deception functioning. The press of vile daemons around her and her comrades was growing greater as the creatures rushed to the defense of their master. As fast as she could cut them down with the Eye, more were taking the places of the slain. Because of this, she was unable to assist Gord; she couldn't even see or sense what was happening to him. In truth,

Leda could not have helped even had she been aware of his dire predicament One moment of distraction and the little dark elven priestess would have been buried under a wave of attacking fiends.

Much the same was happening to the right, where Gellor stood fast. The troubador had laid low a thousand of those monsters subject to the magic of the kanteel. Now all those still able to press toward him were of the sort immune to the harp's dweomers. With the gifts of the Catlord adorning his hands and feet, Gellor placed the kanteel safely in its case, then drew his own longsword. Wielding his blade and wearing the claws of a tiger, the

one-eyed bard tore into the score of netherbeings still advancing. Locked in his own awful melee, he too was unaware of Gord's condition.

The flanged head of the pole arm came flashing down toward Gord's head. Gord thought to use Courflamme to deflect the blow, but instead the sword literally dragged him aside. The blades of the weapon tore lightly at his armor, but this time there was no shock nor was there any pain or damage from the glancing blow. The tip of it was deadly, probably the blades as well, and the weight of its mace head was probably enough to either pierce or break his shadow armor.

All that was bad enough — but worse, Courflamme could not be made to engage the weapon. Could the single Theorpart be so much greater than the greatest token of Balance? That seemed impossible. So, perhaps instead of striking at the blade-end, he should try something else. . . . Gord moved lightly, rapidly, circling to cause his foe to have to turn his body to keep the clumsy pole arm moving and spinning.

"I have patience," Infestix laughed, his voice a horrid hooting. "The wait will make your end all the sweeter." Indeed, time was favoring the daemon. Soon the thousands of his soldiers around them would break through and fall upon Gord and his companions. If Initiator didn't kill them before then, the sheer weight of hundreds of enraged demons and netherbeings would.

Suddenly Gord felt a warm tingling as if the sword were sending energy to him, and at that instant he closed with a rush. The pole arm that was Initiator shot out, Infestix meaning to use it either to skewer the foolish little human or to hold him at bay with its projections. Losing no momentum, Gord darted to one side and dashed in toward the daemon, past the end of the weapon. Infestix tried frantically to pull the long weapon back in.

Trying to shorten a hold on a shaft ten feet long, even for a being as tall and strong as Infestix, is slow work compared to the charge of a swordsman. Gord's right arm moved out, Courflamme's point darted from right to left, downward. Glittering sparks coruscated from contact of Theorpart and sword. There followed a piercing scream, a sound that could only be likened to ancient metal being torn apart within the confines of some sepuichral cavern.

Initiator fell to the demon sward of iyondagur, changed in the blink of an eye into its true form.

Beside the misshapen piece of alien stuff writhed the severed fingers of the right hand of Infestix.

It took Gord a moment to comprehend what had happened. By then it was too late. He finally understood and galvanized his actions into a further attack but the master of daemonkind was gone. Howling in pain and fury, Infestix had fled back to his own stronghold in the pits of Hades. The Theorpart remained where it lay. With a quick shrug of regret, the young champion stooped and picked the thing up with his left hand, still grasping Courflamme firmly in his right. He took another moment to touch the wormy digits with the sword's tip. The frantically moving things popped as would fat slugs in a fire as the point pierced them, one by one.

"Now, then," Gord said with a satisfied grunt after the last was destroyed. "I think it is time to see about the refuse the daemon-fop has left behind."

He took a look to the left and then the right, saw the nearness of disaster, and acted. Springing first to where Leda was, Gord fell upon the most threatening enemy first, cleaving the hulking plagadaemon from crown to crotch with a single blow from Courflamme. The thud of the monster hitting the ground made Leda turn in alarm. "It's all right, girl," Gord managed to blurt, spearing a second plagante on his sword with a long thrust immediately thereafter. "Just guard my back and I'll deal with the rest now."

With near shock, Leda noted that Gord held the Theorpart that had been Infestix's in his left hand as he plied the sword against the last nearby foe. The others of Infestix's horde had stopped short their rush, and the monsters were now milling uncertainly, seeking direction. "Thanks, my love," she panted during the respite. "I can manage a bit more, though. Should I hit them with another blast from the Eye?"

"Save your strength," Gord told her. "They will realize soon enough that they have no more master and relic to protect them. Then there will be rough work and slaughter, for the Abat-dolor will fall on them, and there will be a stampede. We must not get caught in that! Come now, let's aid Gellor."

Running close by his side, Leda accompanied Gord to where the troubador was fighting some halfhundred paces distant, nearly out of sight behind a windrow of dead daemons and maelvis whose hacked and ruined bodies showed evidence of weapon-work Although exhausted, she managed to summon enough vitality from somewhere inside her to command the Eye a last time. From the sphere came things of opaline hue, bouncing ovoids that arced and rebounded as they landed in scores among the lines of enemies coming toward them. Each teardrop of the stuff left a strand behind as it bounced, and whenever one of those strands contacted a daemon it splattered into a mesh of viscous, gluey lines.

After several impacts, each bouncing spheroid slowed and formed a puddle upon striking down for the final time. The substance of each ovoid must have been much compressed, for each puddle formed by one was a yard or more in diameter. The stuff was also deadly. Whether leathery, horn, scaled or spiked, the substance seemed to cut into the flesh of the demons and daemons as if each puddle encountered was made of molten lava. "Gods!" Leda uttered in a near whisper. "What is this thing — and me — capable of?"

"Sufficient to stop the foe dead in their tracks," Gellor said drily but with appreciation. "Much longer, and the three of us would have been but two."

Gord shook his head. "Put the Eye away now, please," he told the dark elf, with a squeeze of thanks to her arm. "You have done more than your share, and to attempt more work will try you beyond knowing. I fear. The Eye now grows stronger by drawing on the Theorpart, Courflamme's energy too. That I like not at all. Something seems to meddle with all here . . . . but what?"

"Where is the master of daemons?" Gellor asked, peering around at the disorganized masses of daemons now skulking at some distance from the three.

"Back in his pit, minus his rotted right hand," Gord replied with a grim smile of satisfaction.. "We can vaunt over the fallen enemy later. Let's get ourselves back into the lines of the Abat-dolor there, and give Elazalag the good news — and the Eye of Deception."

"You shan't! Not really? That was just a ruse, wasn't it?"

"No, Leda. I spoke forthrightly and with truth. These demonfolk have carried out their portion of the bargain, and now we shall deliver ours."

"What if they are planning treachery?" the drow priestess said angrily. "What of your fine honesty then?"

"In that event, my dear Leda, we will serve up to them the same dish that Infestix and his horde Just found so unpalatable. We three can devastate the greatest of the Abat-dolor in a twinkling, then use the power of Theorpart, sword, and Eye too, for that matter, to be elsewhere."

They were almost to the place where the ebonhued demon army stood in wonder, trying to decide just what to do now that their more numerous foes had suddenly left off fighting and pulled back to stand in confusion opposite the Abat-dolor. Of course there were those shouting for a charge, but Elazalag and her nobles were keeping the masses of warriors in control awaiting the approaching humans.

"These ones will try no trickery, I trow," Gellor ventured. "I detect more than a little awe radiating from the princess, there, and Herald Nisroch too."

It was so. "You bested the greatest of daemons!" Elazalag uttered with amazement. "I saw mighty Infestix yowl off to his own realm as does a cur when it loses its tail to the jaws of another dog."

"He will eventually regrow it — his fingers, I mean. I took them, and his relic too, in the contest," Gord asserted.

This one would be a mighty champion of the Abyss, my Princess," Nisroch said, meaning it to be sotto voce, but booming it regardless because of his massive lungs and resonant voice. "With that one as your consort, my Princess, the Abat-dolor would control all demonlum before — "

"Enough!" commanded the tall demoness, but immediately after silencing her herald Elazalag cast a sidelong and speculative glance in Gord's direction. Tell me. Champion, have you ever considered — "

"He has not, nor will he ever!" Leda interrupted with a firm, cold voice. Grabbing Gord's arm possessively as she spoke, the little dark elf then gazed unflinchingly at the feral eyes of Princess Elazalag. Without turning, Leda addressed the young man. "Give her the Eye of Deception, Gord. Then I think it Is high time for us to be on our way from here."

The anticlimactic tension of this tableau was too much for Gord to bear. He laughed a full, clean laugh, the mirth rolling from his stomach up through his chest and spilling out from his mouth in staccato bursts. At the same time, though, he placed his right arm around the mailed shoulders of the beautiful drow who clung to him possessively and hugged her closer. "You, lady of mine, are most certainly correct. There is still much to accomplish and but scant time to do it in. May I have the artifact, please?"

Leda passed the container that held it into his hand, and Gord released his arm from its hold around her. Formally, with a slight bow, Gord proffered the sigil-strewn bag with the Eye of Deception within to the tall, six-fingered demoness who was sovereign ruler of the nine clans of Abat-dolor on iyondagur.

"Princess Elazalag, I present to you the gift which was promised in our bargain. The Eye of Deception is of the Abyss and has been held by the Abat-dolor for centuries, I am told. The artifact was only beyond the ken of demonkind for a brief time, but I offer my apologies for even so brief a hiatus. Please take it and use it as you will on behalf of the Abat-dolor, for that is as it should be."

It didn't seem incongruous to Gord to speak thus. The demoness and her kin were very much like humans. Yes, their repute placed them as some of the most vicious of all demons, but that was in keeping with their near-humanity. Evil they were, undoubtedly so, but not always — and, when pressed, what race of mankind was not also vicious and homicidal?

The demoness reached out and took the thing from him, acting with a little more haste than was called for, but such anxiety was understandable too. Elazalag was thinking of how this would redress the balance between iyondagur and Mezzafgraduun, between herself and the demonking Graz'zt. "With this I shall reunite all of the Abat-dolor," she said loudly, so that all the demons in earshot might hear and exult. "I shall extend our lands and bring woe to all those enemies who harassed and belittled the Abat-dolor when we were weak!"

"I doubt you'll need it to finish off the rabble left behind by Infestix when he fled," Gord said as he saw the trickle of movement toward the rear by the disorganized and frightened enemy, showing the beginnings of panic and rout. "They are leaderless and will soon be in full flight. On the other hand,

negotiations with Graz'zt will be most interesting, Princess, and I think you will—"

His further thoughts were drowned out by a growing roar. The ranks of the Abat-dolor warriors were alive with triumph as the word was passed among them. Their princess had recovered the Eye, and the daemon was chased from their land. Victory! Cheers and shouts rolled along their front, outward, company by company, then back inward again.

Nisroch looked at his sovereign, and Elazalag nodded. The herald brought the princess's chariot up, and as soon as she was within it, Nisroch's voice bellowed out above the shouts and cheers: "Forward! Kill the enemy!"

That was all it took. The command was taken up by a thousand throats, then a hundred thousand, or so it seemed to the humans, who were nearly deafened by the din. With a continuing roar, the whole mass of the ebon-hued demon army rolled forward at a run. Elazalag with her hippokeres-drawn chariot, flanked by a score of cavalry on either hand, led the charge.

The riders on the wings forged ahead of the formation, making the advance into a crescent of death. It struck the fleeing horde of invaders as if it were a tidal wave, and fully a quarter of the foe were slain by that first impact.

"Let us leave this field," Gord said, turning from the slaughter that was now commencing in earnest. "I mind not seeing such as those meet their end, for it is meet. What happens afterward is something I care not to contemplate, let alone witness."

"Something you said before, Gord," Gellor mentioned as they began walking from the place toward the castle that sprawled some miles away.

"What's that, old friend?"

"The Eye — you said it was drawing power from Courflamme, and from the Theorpart, too."

"Only because of our thoughts and emotions, only because of the proximity and the rapport which had built as each of us fought the enemy."

"The burning spheres were a nonesuch, Gord," Leda said, including the bard by a quick glance in his direction. "What did you think of them, Gellor?"

"Sufficient to devastate whole battalions with a single discharge," he responded.

"It was your thought which brought them forth, Leda," Gord told the dark elven priestess. "That device is a potent one. It is of great evil, but the force can be turned to other ends ... on occasion."

"Doesn't your own sword bind the powers of the netherspheres, Gord?"

"Yes, Leda, It does that; but it also holds, separately but in conjunction, the might of the spheres of Light. Balance binds all, and enables the forces to be used in equilibrium. The manifold energies of the Eye of Deception can produce terrible results. They are always of Evil. Who can say what can be performed with that great relic? In the end, its employment always benefits the Abyss.

"The sword, though, has no truly dark side, not any longer. Courflamme is the artifact of primordial neutrality. It exists to enable the cosmos to continue as it is, each of the disparate forces within it keeping the others in check. Perhaps it is the doom of Tharizdun, or perhaps the cosmos must change. It is not written anywhere that things will always be as they are."

"We take the Soulless Sounding again, Gord?" The troubador asked that as the three came within a bowshot of the grim walls of Elazalag's castle.

"We must make it seem that way, at least," the young champion of Balance answered. "It is now readily apparent to our enemies what we are about. There will be rejoicing amongst the great demonlords, of course, for now only they among the forces of Evil possess Theorparts. After the celebration, they will begin to scheme and plan how to gain the one I hold. With that will come a further realization, and then understanding will be our greatest threat."

"Don't be so enigmatic, youngster," Gellor said to him. "Let's have the whole of your thoughts. We're in this right alongside you, aren't we?"

"For now, anyway," Gord concurred. "Who can say what will transpire once the first part of the quest is concluded and the final portion commences?"

"Gord!"

"All right, all right. Once the rulers of this place understand that I have one Theorpart, and that I took it with relative ease, It will strike those with

the other two that I am the cat, they the rats, and not vice versa." Gord looked at each of his companions in turn. "Consider this: We had the aid of the Abat-dolor to assure success. Perhaps we had to have such aid, although we might have succeeded with stealth and surprise. No matter now, we have the thing from Infestix, and that one is out of play for a time. At best, the foes will possibly assume that in yielding up the Eye of Deception we have made ourselves sufficiently weaker; then they will remain vulnerable."

"But we have Initiator now, and its strength is twice that of the Eye," Leda said with concern. "That cannot escape even dolts such as Szhublox!"

"Not indefinitely. . . ." Gellor commented, considering the lord of demonium.

"It is least likely that they will band together and make common cause to resist us," Gord said with a solemnity unusual to him. "But we must not dismiss the possibility entirely. With two Theorparts, they would equal our own force, and they have countless demon warriors to call upon to guard them too. If father and son, Graz'zt and Iuz, should somehow set aside their differences for the moment, we would never wrest the two remaining parts from their grasp — not in time, anyway."

"Then we must keep the two factions warring," murmured the troubador, stroking his cheek reflectively. "Yet doing so might be difficult."

"Only if we attack one without offering nonhostility to the other," Leda told Gellor. "Graz'zt is the one with whom we must treat, so that is where we will go next."

"That is so, but neither Elazalag nor any other must know that until we have had opportunity to convince the demonking that he must accept us as his allies."

"We will dupe him, then, and when the second Theorpart is in your hands turn both against him?"

"No, Leda, not quite. We will have to mislead Graz'zt, and in the end it might well be necessary to force him to yield Unbinder to me. The thing can bring him only destruction in the end. Tharizdun will have Graz'zt's life amongst the first the Ultimate One slaughters in his new empire of Evil. Demon and deva, no matter. Both sorts are inimical to what that one plans for the multiverse. It could be that the demonking must be killed by us in

order to gain the last portion of the key of doom, but at least Graz'zt will have a chance this way. If he manages to hold the Theorpart from us, another will gain it, or the three will unite on their own. Then destruction is a certainty for him and all demons above the dimmest mentalities."

"That is logical. I accept your reasoning," Leda said. "Something you said makes me wonder, though. Why haven't the fractions knitted themselves into the whole again? Once done, Tharizdun is loosed, no matter the hands that the key might temporarily rest in isn't that so?"

Gord nodded. "I cannot answer that. Think, too, of the other mysteries. Basiliv is gone from us — did you know that? No force seems able to gain the upper hand anywhere. . . ."

"The Demiurge is slain?" Leda looked pale. "Only one of stature beyond the gods could accomplish that! Even so small a thing as my ability to draw forth the energies of the Eye, to employ it with ever-greater success and not be drained to a shell by its inherent evilness. ... I saw Vuron look puzzled by that. It seems as if we have some mighty unseen foe laboring against us, another equally invisible ally assisting the cause."

"Then we will break the deadlock and in that process I think the recondite will become manifest. Our success will unveil both foe and friend alike."

"We go to Graz'zt, then?" Gellor asked as the three strode into the nearly empty bailey of the Abat-dolor stronghold.

"Not via the Soulless Sounding, I'll wager," Leda asserted, looking at the gray-eyed man who had once been no more than a thief and swordsman raising devilment in Greyhawk City. "Gord will have some other means. . . ."

He smiled at them both, but said nothing.

Chapter 9

THEY SAT IN SIX concentric circles, each one smaller and lower as these tiers progressed from largest inward. Six was the favored number of demonium, the most potent number known in the Abyss.

In the sixth and lowest portion of the amphitheater-like space formed by the circles was seated an array of the greatest demons of those present. The issue of who would occupy those lowest seats had been resolved only after many squabbles and threats. The cambion Iuz posed proudly there, with Iggwilv at his right and the ghastly Zuggtmoy beside him to his left. Opposite those three was the bulk of Orcus. Marduk, king of fire demons, was also present, as were Baphomet, Cagrino, and Abraxas. There was space for others, but the eight privileged to be seated in the lowest circle could not agree on other candidates to fill the vacancies, so the places remained empty. In the next lowest level were Var-Az-Hloo, Azazael, Bulumuz, Socoth-Benothas, Szhublox, Lugush, and others totalling eighteen demon lords.

At each succeeding higher level were seated still more of the noble demons of the Abyss, with numbers of greater demons occupying the uppermost two tiers. for there were no lords and other nobles to occupy those spaces. All things considered, it was the largest convocation ever of the most powerful beings of demonium, or so avowed those in attendance. They ignored the fact that once Graz'zt could have commanded as many to a council. But he was no longer so powerful, and in fact the ebon demonking was now the chief foe .... or was he? Rumors flew from tushfilled maw to toothy beak, from slobbering mandibles to slavering jaws.

"We are called to assemble for the final assault on Graz'zt," averred a chief among the Yatish demons. "No — there is a new enemy even worse," contradicted a beetle-browed Thang. Such conversation ran back and forth, up and down the tiers in a cacophony of voices too alien for human ears to comprehend. The noise soon became so great that the masters seated far beneath the rest could no longer speak to each other in shouts, let alone murmurs.

Iuz employed his Theorpart to bring silence, causing things like swooping bats to swirl in a dark spiral from where he sat. These manifestations of eldritch power winged upward and seemed to snatch

away the very sounds from the mouths and proboscises of the creatures above. In a few seconds there was total silence in the whole of the great place. Then the fat cambion arose and addressed all, even though he looked only at the seven others who were on his level.

"I command this great relic," he said haughtily, shaking the Theorpart as he spoke. "As undisputed master—" He got no farther, for both Iggwilv and Zuggtmoy leaped erect at those words, each grabbing for the thing he held and succeeding only in fixing Iuz's arms before him and locking the Theorpart there.

"Give me the Awakener," said the goatish Orcus, "and then you three will have no quarrel."

Baphomet, Cagrino, Marduk, and Abraxas were almost as quick with their demands for the Theorpart. The three fighting for a hold on it ceased their glares at each other in order to snarl denials to each of the other five great demons. Realizing that disaster was near, Iuz sat down quickly, placing the relic before him crosswise. Both the elder witch and the queen of fungi likewise sat down, seizing an end each. The cambion retained his hold on the center portion. "There, you all see we are united in our own alliance. Now we must all do likewise."

"There is too little room for all our many hands on that small Theorpart," Abraxas drawled. Var-Az-Hloo guffawed from behind the demon lord at that. "Let us stop this bickering. You all know why we're here!"

"We don't know — not at all!" came shouts and cries from above.

"As the only being here who is not of demonkind," Iggwilv said in her raucous shriek "I will speak to the matter." Withholding her thought that she was the only truly masterful creature in the amphitheater, and that it was at her instigation that the assemblage had been gathered, the witch went on. "All of you can at least sense the shift, the eddies brought about by the sudden change." There were various discordant assents. Iggwilv quickly answered the queries that she knew would come. "A human, a mere mortal, dared to enter demonium recently. He is armed with some great power, for that minimus managed to wound the daemon Infestix, to snatch our Theorpart from that one's hand, and now struts as a popinjay somewhere in the Abyss still!"

She paused while mutters of amazement swept through the assemblage. "How?" "Who?" "This cannot be!"

"My son, the great Iuz, will show us all." Iggwilv answered, and gestured to the cambion to do his work.

Not realizing that he acted as would a puppet, Iuz set to work with the Theorpart as directed. Before the many, burning eyes of the motley assembly of demons appeared a vision. It was a checkered field, with colors showing various spheres and planes, the same hues indicating the nature of the little figures scattered about its multidimensional levels. Some of the pieces shown were highlighted by glows.

"Here is the place of Graz'zt," Iuz announced. That image was a Jumble. Only the bright, pearlescent gleam of Unbinder, the third Theorpart, was clear. By concentration the cambion cleared and ordered the scene, but then all was abstracted. "I make the whole comprehensible, but then there is no definition, and entities can be ascertained only by relative strength; thus the various henchmen serving the stu— Graz'zt: there Yeenoghu, that is the image which is Kostchichie, Palvlag, Vuron, and so on."

"What? All of the strong ones are with Graz'zt! Who sides with Demogorgon?"

Iuz sounded smug when he bawled his reply. "The mighty Demogorgon, his kith and kin trailing behind, has deserted the field. Feeling safer at home, no doubt, he has given up his fight against Graz'zt."

"What of Infestix?" The call came from Levithan, one still uncommitted.

"That frail one was bested thus. . . ." With a gesture, Iuz caused the Theorpart to recreate in abstract form the battle on iyondagur. The demons saw it, recognizing the figure that was its princess, the pawns of Abat-dolor, maelvis, dreggals, dumalduns, and the assorted demons that had taken part as soldiers. The image of the daemon-piece was tall, powerful, and it was made greater by the nimbus that was the Theorpart Infestix wielded.

Then from the ranks of the ebon demons came a triple-pronged figure. Its passage removed pawns to the left and right of its path, and the whole showed a multihued radiance around it. There — that is certainly the Eye of Deception," Iuz supplied for the benefit of those farther away. "The silvery-gold flash is a vile harp forged by the First Spellbinders. It is not as strong

as the Eye, but it is potent. And what of the diamond and jet gleam of the middle tine there?" he asked, pointing a long, sharp-taloned finger with three joints at the abstraction. "None of us can say. It varies from dim to bright, so its true power is not possible to assess readily. . . . But seemingly it is a force of greater puissance than a Theorpart!" That last the cambion fairly roared after a dramatic pause.

"See? It pierces the figure which represents the daemon, and Infestix is gone from the field. Behind remains the glow of the Initiator. Now no demon gains the thing, for it becomes a part of the green piece, and that can be only the one championing Balance."

Iggwilv interrupted him, not by speaking but through her own manipulation of the scene that the Theorpart projected. The ancient witch tapped the relic, spoke a word, and the trident-like piece suddenly expanded to a huge image that towered above the second tier. Then it shimmered, and instead of the abstraction stood three ghostly images. "Hie small human is named Gord," she croaked loudly. "The drow is Eclavdra, once high priestess serving Graz'zt. The one-eye using the enchanted stone in place of his other orb is none other than our old enemy Gellor," Iggwilv spat.

The scene shifted once more, and it was Orcus who bleated out the next words. "The little fool gives the female his prize!"

"He has a penchant for passing out Theorparts," Zuggtmoy said.

"What was that?"

"She said that the interfering little shit has done that before!" Iggwilv snapped back to the ram-horned demonking.

"Why do you use so delicate a term to describe him?" The query came from the third tier, and the witch ignored it.

"He possesses still the violent aura of might. See? The drow holds the relic, and she shows its glow plainly. There is still another glow emanating from the little man. We must assume that he has a new object, a token of Balance, which we have heretofore been unaware of. I think it is the sword he carries."

"How did they come to our sphere?"

"We have scried that out — but only after the fact. When they came there was a veil hiding their arrival. The two men entered and passed along the

Soulless Sounding, were joined by the female and with her the Eye, and then the three of them came into the lands of the Abat-dolor."

"The black ones must be exterminated for aiding those three!" The calls came from many of the assembled demons.

"Elazalag has the Eye of Deception now." Zuggtmoy boomed. "With its strength, she and her clans will not be so easily done for."

"Use Awakener. It will crush—"

"The Theorpart must remain countering the relic in Graz'zt's possession," Iggwilv shouted. "Save revenge for a time when it can be enjoyed fully and at leisure. We have a thorny problem to consider now, and we must not err in our judgment."

"Let us locate the whereabouts of those three petty beings and take their Theorpart," Cagrino chittered.

"I think it better we join together now, finish Graz'zt, and with two Theorparts seek out the intruders," Iuz huffed.

Marduk had a different course to suggest. "I can parley with Palvlag, and through him we can arrange a truce with the ebon one. Let all demonium conspire to destroy the agents from elsewhere first. Then we can—"

"Baah!" shouted Orcus. "We will then fight over who should gain the third portion!"

"Won't we anyway?" suggested another demonlord, with the ultimate rhetorical question.

"At least now we have fewer who can claim to have a right to a Theorpart," came the booming voice of Zuggtmoy. "To treat with Graz'zt means we have added more voices to the clamor. Let us crush him, take the relic he has, and then gain the third."

"We could add the Eye of Deception and perhaps those two other objects of power to our booty," Baphomet speculated, thinking of what he could possibly gain if a Theorpart did not fall to his lot.

"Yes. We must diminish the number of claimants to nobility and reshape power and territorial holdings in the Abyss anyway," said Abraxas, who hungered after the realm of Yeenoghu. "Many will be the lesser prizes which will accumulate in our boodle as we sweep away our enemies."

"But a human! Surely those three must be considered our principal foes, the greater threat! Demon can understand and deal with demon, but the champion of Balance is—"

"Enough maundering, Marduk it is time for a vote." So saying, Iuz posed the two possibilities to the assembly. Those favoring an immediate search for the three invading humans were told to stand (or raise their torsos upright), those seeking immediate and complete destruction of Graz'zt were to remain seated (or as they were). All not in accord with one course or the other were given time to leave the amphitheater. Surprisingly, only a handful of the demons did leave. Marduk was at the head of those deserting the alliance.

"Excellent! One fewer to claim a chance at a Theorpart," noted Iuz, and that was a statement that none of the remaining demons challenged.

"Twenty-seven only," said Iggwilv, counting the number standing. "Do you bow to the greater number's wishes, or will you leave the assemblage?"

The ones who had favored hunting down Gord, Eclavdra, and Gellor were by no means ready to leave. They all sat down without undue commotion, and the leaders then began to make their plans to crush Graz'zt. Although he now had only a one-front war to fight, what with Demogorgon's desertion of the struggle, there was now more arrayed against Graz'zt than ever before. "He no longer has the power of the Eye of Deception, either," noted Szhublox.

"Unless that bag, Elazalag, decides to throw in with him," quipped Iggwilv. "She is almost human, and that worries me," the witch continued with a serious note in her voice. "The clans under her rule might be sufficient, what with the Eye, to enable that oversized dog-turd to conduct a long defense. Perhaps we should have . .."

"What is that you mumble about?" Iuz made the demand an insult as well.

"Tend to the strategies," she countered. "I'll be heard loud enough when I so wish!" Yet something nagged at the back of iggwllv's mind. Did she allow her own hatred for Graz'zt to cloud her judgment? Impossible! But . . . "Now, Iuz, I think we must consider the division of the hordes into battles, and which of these great demonlords will be in charge of them!"

Chapter 10

THE TRANSITION FROM COLD and windswept rock desert to the steamy verdure of Mezzafgraduun was sudden. There was no demarcation, no clue that they were about to leave the inhospitable barren of an unnamed tier of the Abyss and find themselves suddenly traversing the jungle frontier of Graz'zt's own domain.

The three had actually entered the Soulless Sounding where its portal stood in the midst of Elazalag's massive castle. They did so unceremoniously, without any leave-taking whatsoever. They simply strode into the place while the ebon-hued warriors watched closely but stayed well clear of such ones as they were now known to be. They were in the ghastly passage one moment and out of it the very next, barely treading the insubstantial and shifting stuff of the Sounding.

Leda took them to the gate that was at hand, but it entered a deep and wild region of the Abyss. Six thousand kinds of beasts existed in demonium, six hundred brutes, things worse by far than the bestial fauna of the place. She knew this place, for it was one where the demonlords hunted for sport. It was wild. harsh, and sparsely populated. The things that did inhabit the region were vast, ferocious, deadly. Unlike the swarming menagerie that had greeted Gord and Gellor on their arrival upon the uppermost portion of demonium, the brutes of this region were silent killers who stalked prey in stealth with relentless determination.

Often the hunters from elsewhere became the hunted here, and lesser demons were prone to become morsels in the belly of one or another of the lurking things, as their demonlord masters laughed and despoiled at the amusement thus provided, each safe in armor, armed with beast-slaying weapons, ringed round by their huntsdemons holding sawedged pikes in nervous grips.

Gellor held his ivory harp ready, fingers poised to pluck the silver wires and send out fear and death to the predatory things that slunk just out of sight. Leda now bore the Theorpart, knowing the use of such a thing from her experience with Graz'zt's own great relic. But Gord was not willing to risk her use of the terrible relic that was called Initiator. He attuned Courflamme to the Theorpart, drawing dark force from it into his sword. Leda wielded the relic still, and its force was greater than that channeled by

the Eye of Deception, but thanks to Gord's efforts she was not in peril of becoming a mere zombie possessed by the terrible instrument.

The three sped across the cold wastes, moving with strides which would have left the swiftest courser behind, yet moving without exertion as if they merely strolled at a leisurely pace through a pleasant parkland. Even at such a rate of travel, a few of the hunters of the tier managed to stay on their trail as hounds would track a stag.

"Our blood is to such monsters as gold is to a miser's eyes," Leda said in response to the bard's query about the phenomenon. "The scent of it will draw beast and brute from leagues distant to get at us."

"Mezzafgraduun knows no such monsters?"

"No, Gord. The swamps and tangles of the jungle which rings the place have many ferocious things within, but none so fearsome as the brutes here."

Gord actually grinned. "I know you told me that before, and it isn't that I doubted you. I just had to have your second assurance after seeing this desert. It is exactly what I had hoped for."

"An icy waste of rock and nightmare scrub populated with such creatures as would make dragons flee gibbering in fear? I confess my absolute amazement," Gellor said in a tone of disgust. "My nerves are as taut as the strings of the kanteel."

"How long will such things survive in a warmer clime, lady?" Gord asked the beautiful little dark elf, ignoring Gellor.

"There are a dozen or so beasts in the demonking"s menagerie — even a monstrous demon-brute was caged therein for a short time. Graz'zt used it in his games, though."

"Then let us be on the safe side and try to round up a dozen or two of the worst sort we can," Gord said, grinning again with boyish glee.

"You wouldn't. . . ." Gellor said with an expression of dawning understanding spreading across his face.

The gray eyes sparkled back at the bard. "Oh, but I would. We will, to be exact. You, my dear old troubador, will stand ready to put down any recalcitrant brute with the dweomer of your harp. Leda, you will use the

Theorpart to draw them to us quickly but with whatever humility and fear such things can experience and retain within their minds, dim as they might be. I, In turn, will see to it that they remain tractable and nonaggressive to us. Courflamme will be sufficient, I am sure!"

"And then?" Gellor asked with near sarcasm. The scheme sounded preposterous, considering what sort of monsters Gord had in mind.

"Yes, Gord. Are you sure—"

"You two must trust me on this. We must make an entrance upon Mezzafgraduun, and gam the palace of Graz'zt thereafter. We have no guards, no army, nothing to demonstrate our might. Yes, I do believe we could accomplish the journey without mishap, and after we cut down a few thousand of the demonking's own, he might be willing to hear what we have to propose to him. But that would be a poor way to begin a delicate negotiation. Graz'zt would be smarting from the loss of face and the loss of his soldiers, and the loss of the Eye would then burn as a midsummer sun on the brow of a serf."

Gord gestured around, taking in the whole sweeping harshness of the fell wild. "From this barren we will bring an escort of creatures which the great amongst demonkind hold deadly and fierce. So many will we bend to our will that the loss of a few from combats in the jungles of Mezzafgraduun, and from whatever heat and pestilences will be there as well, will not detract from the spectacle of our appearance before the capitol of the ebon monarch." He paused, looking at his old comrade first, then at Leda.

"Why do you look at me so?" she asked.

"To gain your confidence — only I keep forgetting just how breathtakingly lovely you are, so my eyes lingered overlong."

Drow elves are of black complexion, a hue as glossy and ebon as alabaster is shining white. At his words Leda flushed, and her ebon cheeks were brightened as if suddenly highlighted by fiery opalescence. "Stop that! You make me feel as if I am a giddy child, and in this place you need a far different sort of companion."

"Do stop the billing and cooing, you two. If this craze-brained scheme is to work, we must get to it — and mind our asses in the process! See — there crouches something now, come to devour us all as you flirt!"

* * *

The particular horror the bard had pointed to fell to a saurian behemoth in a duel of mutual destruction immediately after the strange procession entered the ringing rain forest of Mezzafgraduun proper. It was fortunate for the three that all of the demonbrutes they had by now subdued and forced to form their train were swift, for the great stratum was immense in its dimensions. At the astounding rate of fifty leagues per day the three crossed forest and swamp, and still it took them a sennight to pass from there to the sooty-grassed savanna beyond.

It was fortunate as well that they had little need for rest, let alone actual sleep. Some of the things in tow were as cunning as they were ravenous and deadly. Two demon-brutes were executed in turn for their insistent attempts to savage and devour the humans. Three of the monsters succumbed in the sweltering heat of the grassland; another was killed in a fight with a pack of myriapod carnivores with shovel-toothed mouths set in wolverinelike heads. Thus, by sheer chance, they passed through the thousand miles of jungles and arrived upon the central plateau of the demonking with exactly a dozen of the huge things still alive and full of ferocity.

The plateau was populated by many demons. As soon as the humans and their caravan of horrors left the obscuring foliage, word flashed through the place. When they had come within a hundred miles of Graz'zt's own citadel, the three were met by an army of demons, the ebon demonking himself at their head.

Graz'zt, just as all other mighty ones of the netherspheres, was cognizant of the humans' intrusion, of Infestix's fate, and of the transfer of the Theorpart the daemon had held to the hands of another. Again as with all others, though, the great Graz'zt had been unable to determine exactly what was occurring, where the Theorpart was located, and why things transpired as they did.

The defeat of Infestix had resulted in the hurried departure of Demogorgon with his hordes. That had been a boon, no doubt. Certain minor nobles had again sided with him, and thus Graz'zt found the ranks of his defending armies replenished and almost solid again. Then again, Vuron's return, with Nergel and Palvlag and the remnants of their force, gave the demonking both added power and a reserve. Scouts and mobile

companies only were needed to cover the borders of his empire away from the lines where Iuz and the allied demon lords attacked. Graz'zt was fighting a one-front war again.

He had dismissed Vastyi the Toadmaster to return to Oerth and harry the realm of Iuz there. Kostchichie and his battalions of demon-ogres and demon-giants now commanded the left front, Yeenoghu the right, and Vuron the central force — that last despite the albino's disgrace at having lost the Eye of Deception.

Oh, yes! Graz'zt knew full well the treachery of the drow Eclavdra — no, her name was Leda! He had forced the truth out of Vuron. It had been a near thing for the albino. Graz'zt had considered executing his steward, and in fact imprisonment and torture had been commenced when the shift in power sent tremors through the Abyss as would an earthquake. The force at Graz'zt's disposal had been cut by almost a third, but the power of his foes had been reduced by half. On a strict reckoning of arcane energies, the demonking now had parity with the attackers, although the innate powers of his foes, and their numbers in massed soldiers, still heavily favored them.

"What would you have me do with you, faithless dog?" he had demanded of the battered Vuron.

"Free me to serve you, my King," the stick-thin albino had rasped. "Even thus, Lord, I sense that there is new hope arising for you. The . . . the . . . object I allowed to be stolen from you is not in the hands of an antagonist!"

"No, you pale fool? It now rests in Elazalag's possession on iyondagur!" Graz'zt paused and watched Vuron as he informed the demonlord of that. He and the ruler of the sundered nine clans of the Abat-dolor were bitter enemies. "What would you suggest I do about that?"

Vuron hesitated only for the space of a heartbeat or two, then spoke through his dry and half-crushed throat. "Make peace with Princess Elazalag, my King. Offer to reunite all the lands of your race, tell her you wish her to rule beside you as queen. Promise anything, do anything. She will bring not only the return of your object of power. Lord — Elazalag will come with her wild warbands of Abat-dolor warriors, the hippokeres squadrons. With such force at your disposal, I can — you can — stop your enemies in their tracks, even launch a counterstroke into the marches of Shubgottla____ "

He ceased speaking, for the dark demon was laughing. "Ah! Wouldn't that petal-skinned Baphomet snort and bellow in rage and fear at the devastation of his own lands?" Graz'zt said with a hearty voice. "You never cease to amaze me, Vuron. You are made of stuff not found elsewhere in demonium, I think Even while in extremis, you plan and advise as if seated at my right hand on a padded chair of honor. You counsel reconciliation with she who is your worst enemy!"

"That is so, my Liege."

"Free him!" Graz'zt commanded. The skuda guardian nearby moved on scorpion legs to obey, and in a minute the albino stood on his feet again, reeling but alive. "I have not fully exacted punishment for your failure yet Steward," the demonking said stonily. "You are too useful for me to kill just now, however. You will return to the front, assume command of the center, and defend my realm with your life."

"Yes, King Graz'zt," Vuron croaked with as much vitality as he could muster.

"And I will take your suggestions too respecting Elazalag. If they prove sound, then she and my Eye will soon be here. I will thank you then, but she might well demand your head as her price for coming."

"So be it. I will serve as you command."

* * *

Now the albino worked at the defense, his personal emissaries called upon the court of iyondagur, and Graz'zt stood facing the human niggling who had dared to enter the Abyss and steal a Theorpart. With the demonking were his best and most efficient regiments. Ten thousand strong, the guard, with twice that number just out of sight to either hand, marching at quick-step to encircle the brash interlopers. Graz'zt himself held Unbinder.

That figured out to ten thousand soldiers to handle the dozen brutes in the tram, and ten thousand each for the troubador with his deadly kanteel and the drow who carried a strangely drained Initiator. Graz'zt and Unbinder would manage the little man and his sword. That made the ebon-hued demon feel energized. The Theorpart to counter the magics of the human, his own inky blade to kiss the one wielded by this so-called champion.

Doomscreamer was twice the length and ten times the weight of the puny blade the little fellow bore so jauntily.

"He envisions ill, Gord," Leda whispered as the towering demonking halted to confront them at a short distance.

"That he bodes so is certain," Gord concurred in like voice. Then he regarded Graz'zt and spoke loudly to the demon. "Put aside such thoughts, Graz'zt the Abat-dolor. The brand you so treasure would not withstand the first touch of Courflamme's edge. Neither will the thousands who skulk to either hand suffice to equal the might of Lord Gellor and Lady Leda. We have come in good faith. Let us treat so!"

Those blunt words set the demonking back on his heels. That the small man could know so much sent a chill down the tall demon's iron spine. What to do? Screening his thoughts with the aid of the Theorpart, Graz'zt sent out an urgent call for the albino. Telepathically, the demonking relayed the situation and commanded the immediate presence of Vuron. That took but a few seconds. Then he spoke as if he had been pondering the man's words. "What assurance have I that you do not plan to assault me?"

"Observe the docile brutes who follow us as if they were hounds," Gord replied, knowing he was but playing a game of Graz'zt's making. If the demon wished to gain a little time, then there was no disadvantage to the three in allowing that. It was Vuron who was being summoned. That might actually be what was needed. "Had we desired assassination, mayhem, warfare, we could well have used them and more to bring other than a nonhostile call to discuss certain prospects with you, king. As a gesture of our sincerity, we offer the dozen monsters we have in tow for your pleasure. At my behest, each will go into your menagerie docilely."

"You give oaths?"

"Of course, just as you like. Within bounds, for we are your peers." Gord relayed that clearly, standing straight as he spoke.

"No word from that traitorous imp of Eclavdra could ever— "

At that instant Vuron stepped from behind the ranks of guristhoi guards arrayed just behind Graz'zt. "Your forgiveness for the intrusion. Majesty," he intoned, pretending he had been somewhere to the rear all along. Perhaps the albino thought that would deceive Gord and his companions; possibly

he came forward thus only to appease Graz'zt and allow the demonking to believe that his urgent call for Vuron's assistance had been unnecessary, because the albino was already on the way. It was impossible for Gord to tell the motive, for perhaps Vuron was unaware of just how much the champion of Balance knew about whatever transpired around him. Vuron continued, "After hearing what you have justly said, and these humans replied, I have additional details which might be useful to all concerned."

"You have my leave to speak. Steward."

"The small, gray-eyed man with the dark brows is none other than Gord, my King. It was from his hands that I accepted Unbinder as a gift to you. Leda has always been linked to him — by bonds stronger than those known to demonium, I think She came to Mezzafgraduun and served well for a considerable time. For that she might be heard. The third of these dwellers on the mundane sphere, my Liege, Is not well known to me. His aura is plainly that of a determined and strong hero, albeit one who supports the middling way and has fought against the will of the netherrealms often and with success."

"I see. , .." rumbled Graz'zt. still taking his time.

"I counsel that you make truce for a brief span of time. The parley of these three can be heard within the safe confines of your chambers, Majesty. Then decide on the course you will decree."

Graz'zt cocked an eyebrow at the albino, then stared at the three figures opposite him. "Very well. Order outlying troops to return to my palace. We here will go together into the Soul of Mezzafgraduun."

The trek to the central portion of the stratum was made in virtual silence. Graz'zt went with closed mouth, and Vuron dared not speak. The hulking guristhoi took their cue from the ebon demonking, for despite their looks and propensity, the fierce monsters were aware of their master's mood. One slip always spelled death, and Graz'zt was obviously near rage. If he restrained himself with respect to the three outlanders they escorted, then so much the worse for the demon guards should they irritate the huge monarch.

The party passed through the jungle-like park of dark foliage and brilliant fauna that surrounded the huge palace. Leda shuddered upon seeing the delicate little animals and birds that huddled into fearful immobility at the

scent and sight of the troop. The so-called "sport" that Graz'zt encouraged was so sickening! That thought made her wonder why she felt any shred of responsibility regarding her office in the demonking's court, question her remaining sense of loyalty toward Vuron. After all, as steward, the pale demon was just as culpable for many of the horrors.

"What troubles you, my sweet?" Gord asked in a whisper.

"You should be able to read it clearly enough," Leda snapped back, taking out her aversion and disgust upon him. "Aren't you spying on my thoughts now?"

He looked hurt, but quickly masked the emotion with a stolid expression. "No. That would be an intrusion of . . . No." Without a further word to her, Gord turned to Gellor. "Your sense of this place, old friend — is it all as it seems?"

"You ask me?" There was actual surprise on the bard's face, for he had progressively come to think of Gord as near-omniscient. "That was stupid of me," Gellor then grumbled with self-irritation. "It is rank with violence and deep evil. Some of the more gorgeous forms of foliage are actually nasty carnivores, things with almost-minds, crazed thinking. The 'splendors' of the gardens are indeed fit for demons."

"And of falsehoods?"

"None — save the falsity of demonium itself."

"Then we face next the grand audience. Tell me, lady," Gord said, speaking again directly to the dark elven priestess, "What are we to expect once . . ." The time was soon sped past thus; the palace of the ebon demonking was at hand, and the three entered.

Because the enemy commanders were absent from the field, and with them their Theorpart, Graz'zt assembled his chief nobles in the grim audience hall. He sat alone on his dais of mirror-bright obsidian, but there were tall chairs of state for Yeenoghu, Kostchichie, Nergel, and the rest. Vuron stood behind the demonking's throne. The long chamber was ringed by demon guards. Graz'zt pointed Unbinder at the three humans who stood, small and impotentappearing before the terrible masters of the Abyss.

"You have come to surrender that relic you hold. Just as you sheepishly turned this one over to my steward, Vuron?"

There were sneers and sniggers at those words. Only a weak and stupid fool would have parted with such a prize. Their lord was letting them know that and putting the puny mortal in his place.

Gord smiled blandly and replied with a mild tone. The gift was appropriate at the time, Graz'zt," he said, carefully stressing the name without honorific. "Perhaps you have noted that Lady Leda now wields Initiator. To make things absolutely clear, she will continue to ply its energies on behalf of Balance until I request otherwise. But rest assured that we have not come here to take back the prize you hold, demon. Not now. . . ." He paused to allow the emphasis to bear its full and heavy meaning to Graz'zt and his henchmen.

The ebon demonking was grinding his fanged teeth, trembling with anger at such statements. "Then you have come to die!"

"No. We have come to offer our assurance that your demon-foes, Iuz and the witch-mother too, are in the palm of your mighty hand — should you choose."

"That is assured now," Graz'zt nearly roared, unable to keep his own counsel regarding his latest move. "I have sent for the Princess Elazalag and her warriors. She will fetch me the Eye of Deception too, and with those forces I will crush the fragrant fawns who dare to oppose me!"

Gord shook his head. "Even if all that transpires, Graz'zt, the addition of Elazalag and the Eye will but give you parity. You face a protracted war, and Iuz and Iggwilv will never cease the struggle until they are unable to carry it on."

"That will occur when I slay them with my own hands!" At that shouted proclamation, there was pandemonium in the hall as nobles and demon guards alike bellowed their approval and glee at the thought.

"I am unconvinced," Gord said loudly as soon as there was a lessening of the din. "With Theorpart opposing Theorpart, the opportunity to have your revenge is most improbable." There was a move by Kostchichie toward the three when Gord said that The guristhoi and skuda guards too made as if to attack Graz'zt was tempted, but he saw the one-eyed man's fingers touch the glittering silver of the kanteel's cords, the drow's knuckles tighten as she held the artifact ready, and the strange sword of the little man who dared to

speak thus to him actually pulse as if with inner joy at the prospect of such an event.

The massive demon waved his black six-fingered hand. The lesser demons subsided, and the champion who faced him resumed speaking. "We are here to offer you the opportunity of stripping your adversaries of their ability to so oppose you."

"How?" Graz'zt asked simply, but there was ferocious sarcasm in his growled question.

"When your forces take the field against the foe again, the three of us will be there as well. You will mask our presence with Unbinder, and I will use our own powers to confuse the enemy too. With the Eye of Deception also in play, they will be uncertain as to just what is happening."

"The presence of forces such as you, the Theorpart and the rest — no veil will mask those emanations," Graz'zt said uncertainly.

"And what of the artifact held by Iuz, my King?" Vuron hissed.

Graz'zt ignored the urgent advice. He could guess well enough, but there was time for such things later. He would not let such thoughts into his mind now.

"Enough, Vuron. I will demand your words when I want them. Be silent," he admonished with a distracted tone. "Well? What of the enemy's awareness of your force?"

Gord noted the exchange and waited for the demonking's full attention. "You inquire most rightly, Graz'zt, but there is more than veiling possible. The presence of all portions of the relic is broadcast through the Abyss. It is evident everywhere in the multiverse. With effort, though, the many energies jointly commanded by us can give false readings as to the exact whereabouts of even a Theorpart. If we cooperate, the enemy will be duped into false assumptions. They will come out with all their force to do battle, and when that happens, I will be there to see they don't escape."

There was much discussion, but eventually Graz'zt silenced his counselors. Vuron was opposed, as was Palvlag. All the rest favored the plan. The demonking liked it as well. At the moment when the man was locked in combat with Iuz — or whichever of his trollops happened to be using the Theorpart — Graz'zt would intervene. It was a plan that would

require the cooperation of Elazalag and the use of the Eye. Well, for the gain, he could give up a little. When the two sides were weakened and locked, then would Graz'zt strike. The whole of the eldritch relic would be his! The rest were scraps that his dogs could snarl and snap over.

"It is decided, champion of Balance. I command the whole of my demon hordes to take the field against the enemy. See that you and your . . . helpers don't fail!"

"When your forces are ready, Graz'zt, you can be certain that we three will be fully prepared," Gord said unsmilingly. "Many surprises lie in store."

Graz'zt did smile. He was quite in agreement with those last words, but he hid that concurrence most artfully.

Chapter 11

THIS WAS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE!

"At last! The fool is actually coming forth to meet our advance!" That thought and cry of glee came from the cambion. Iuz was watching as his mother, Iggwilv, created a vIvid scene in the deep basin of the pool.

"Silence while I scry," the witch snapped. Her offspring was a trial, but she needed Iuz to further her ends, and all in all he was controllable — too much so, actually. She would have to watch that slut, Zuggtmoy, closely once the second portion of the artifact of Tharizdun was safe in their grasp. "You know, my dear Iuz," Iggwilv hastened to add sweetly, "I must concentrate so that you will have the most accurate picture of what the lumps of dung who dare oppose you are up to."

That mollified him somewhat, for what the ancient witch said was true. Being a half-demon had many advantages, but there were one or two minor drawbacks as well. Iuz couldn't properly scry — "see" what had occurred, was occurring, or would occur — even with the power of the Awakener. "I demand you show me the outcome, then," Iuz said with a sniff and a petulance that belled his bulk and demoniac visage.

"Leave your mother alone," the demon queen Zuggtmoy purred. "She is doing her best Come, let's amuse ourselves while she works." Instead of her monstrous, fungoid form, Zuggtmoy appeared as a billowy-bosomed human garbed in seductive raiment, and her suggestion was obvious.

"No! Get away! I will see all she can conjure up in the pool," Iuz said with irritation. "Time enough for such frivolity later," he added, seeing the frown on the demoness's painted face. "Lend her your assistance," he told Zuggtmoy with only a little of his usual despotic arrogance in his words. "I — we — should savor the scenes of our coming triumph."

"This troubles me," Iggwilv interjected, addressing the demoness. "The sneaking scum called Gord is here somewhere, but I am unable to pin down the location. See? the witch snapped, pointing to the abstract of planes and twinkling motes that now played above the inky stuff in the pool's recess. "There. There. And there, too! Three depictions, but two are mere phantoms, while one shows the true locale of the three and their Theorpart. Which?"

"Pish, dear Wilva," the demoness said with a wave of her hand. "You have the measure of the little man well. This time he will not manage to win," Zuggtmoy added, recalling the other time Gord had opposed them. Obmi had been lost then. That treacherous dwarf was of no consequence, but losing at all was annoying. "See there? That can't be where he and his two dupes finger. Tschyrtollkya is Kostrochie's sty. No reason to be there at all."

"Yes, that's so," Iggwilv agreed. "The bandy-legged moron is with Graz'zt, and there's nothing to be gained on his tier."

"The same is true for that place," Zuggtmoy simpered, pointing to another of the glimmerings cast by the scrying of the eldest of witches. "We saw what occurred when the three trooped into iyondagur and bribed that poxed doxy, Elazalag, with the Eye of Deception."

"That was a fortunate event," Iuz said heartily. "Now she will be worrying Graz'zt from behind as we march to finish that big pile of excrement gone sweet."

"Hmmm . . ." the witch ruminated, not quite so positive about that result. "What if they were with the Abat-dolor still?"

"We know that they penetrated the fringe of Mezzafgraduun," Zuggtmoy said with certainty. "Then the rede was confused, and three images show. If they are still with Elazalag, then it bodes even worse for Graz'zt, for it can mean only that the three aim to attack with the wild clans of the black demonlings at their back That isn't reasonable, though. . . .The glow from the depths," the queen of fungoid demons went on, indicating the strange light near the very lowest places of the portrayal of the Abyss. "That's where the trio lurks. There are things there that even I would hesitate rousing. The Theorpart gives them the ability to command, and with a pack of great brutes to act as soldiery, the one who is champion might actually be able to overcome Graz'zt's horde . ."

"Our own, too?" Iuz said with unbelieving tone.

"Never mind." Iggwilv spat. "He'll not have time. You must be correct, my dearest Queen," the witch said with a fale smile in Zuggtmoy's direction. "We'll have that Theorpart which Graz'zt thinks his own by the time anything can be mustered and brought from the depths."

"I will personally stand in the center of the hordes," Iuz said in an imperious tone. "There will be no bamboozling of me as Graz'zt has managed with the ape-heads. Iuz will pin him to one spot, hold the dolt fast, while you and the others crush his weakling allies and slaughter his second-rate dreck"

"Very brave," Zuggtmoy said dryly.

"A commendable plan," Iggwilv agreed. "I will be right behind you, dear Son." She didn't care to risk herself in a position directly confronting Graz'zt. There was always a chance of backlash or failure. She would merely hover nearby to pick up anything that fell if Iuz failed.

Zuggtmoy saw the plan in much the same way. "My cousin, Szhublox, will command my forces," she announced. "With Orcus and all the other great ones there to contest with the pitiful few lords which Graz'zt will have in his horde, there is no need for me to fight there. I will staunchly assist you, dear Wilva,in standing by Iuz during the course of his victory."

* * *

Later, out on the field where they were drawn up for attack all of the great ones of the Abyss joined to overthrow Graz'zt saw Iuz and the two behind him as he took the central position. Each of the demon lords there hated the cambion, cast covetous glances at the Theorpart he bore, but none, not even the demonking Orcus, denied him the place. Orcus had made a pact with Iggwilv regarding the Theorparts their alliance would hold soon. On the other hand, Areex had dealings with Zuggtmoy, while Baphomet was again treating by secret message with the ebon demonking.

In truth, most of the various powerful nobles of the Abyss had one or more treacherous plots and alliances ready in case things went wrong ... or right. To suggest that double-dealing was rife is to point toward manure as an attraction to flies. Yet despite all that, the throng of demonlords and their soldier demons by the tens of thousands were there ready and eager for the battle.

"He is actually moving to engage us?" Iuz said incredulously.

That is because he has much stiffening," Iggwilv said, muttering a terrible curse immediately thereafter as she beheld Graz'zt's moving army rolling toward them. "See the sow beside him? Elazalag!" (The disgust in the word

made it filthy). "Fortunately for you, dear boy, I brought my own little weapon with me," she added, drawing forth a thick crooked wand.

The Baton d'Agrue!" the cambion exclaimed. "You said it was lost!"

"Don't believe everything you hear," Iggwilv said with a cackle. "Your poor mother must have some secrets — and a little something to protect herself with."

As if not wishing to be outdone, Zuggtmoy produced a strange, cauldronlike vessel with a myriad of projections and bumps, things like knobs, spouts, nozzles, and some unidentifiable extrusions, too. This little kettle will help keep things warm for them," she said, as the thing grew to the size of a great pot before Iuz's gaze.

"You, too? What is that thing?" he demanded, feeling uncomfortable despite his firm grip on the artifact.

The Cauldron of Corruption," she supplied as she adjusted the largest of the nozzles to point toward the advancing Graz'zt. "If you think my little myconid demonlings are potent, wait until I loose the dweomers from this upon those— "

"Muck! What good are those toys of yours — your wand, Iggwilv, that bulking pot, Zuggtmoy — against a Theorpart?"

"Little use, if any, you stu— splendid master of enemies," Iggwilv managed to say without too much fury coming forth. "I — we, Zuggtmoy and I — will use these to spoil any attacks from the rotted Eye of Deception. Thank us both, or else Graz'zt would have you!"

"Oh. . . . Well, I suppose that is why I picked you two as consorts, right? Still, it is I who must bear the brunt of things."

There wasn't time for more such banter. The army led by Graz'zt and Elazalag had come on with deceptive speed, and the front of both forces was suddenly alive with minor spells and hails of nonmagical missiles as the opposing masses rushed to the melee.

It was a mental cry of fear and surprise from Orcus that alerted Iuz and his co-laborers that it was not Graz'zt who came at them. Iggwilv didn't believe what she had heard, neither did Zuggtmoy, but it was Iuz who managed to prove that the gross demonking's telepathic message had been correct. Orcus had found himself facing Graz'zt himself, with relic and

sword both. The ram-headed demon took one look at that, shrieked his mental shriek and then fled the fray, using his own weapon's energies to escape.

Upon hearing all of that telepathically, the cambion turned the force of his Theorpart upon the foe who strode toward him. The dark energy sizzled, burned away the illusion, and there stood a small man with two companions rather than the ebon demon.

"Iuz, I presume," the gray-eyed human sent in telepathic greeting. The calmness of the thought sent a shiver down the cambion's jagged-edged spine. Reflexively, Iuz threw a blast of withering stuff out from the artifact. It was a distillation of his own vileness, meant to shred the man's flesh from his bones. Laughing derisively, the small human tossed the bolt aside with a flick of his sword. Iuz saw that the blade of that weapon now glimmered with the disquieting luminescence of the ray he had sent out. That was enough to convince the cambion.

When she saw what Iuz was doing, Iggwilv used her twisted wand to weave a link to her son. "No, you don't," she muttered in desperation. It was all too apparent to the ancient witch. The fell champion of Balance was upon them, and without an army of demons to assist, Iuz had no intention of facing man and sword. He was using the Awakener to transport himself to safety. Iggwilv's magical link acted as a towline, so she would be carried to safety along with the cambion.

At the same instant that occurred, Zuggtmoy had enmeshed both in her own demonic field. She clutched her Cauldron of Corruption in a deathlike grip and prepared for the shock that she knew was coming. Then Iuz winked out of existence there, leaving a cloud of burning motes behind as he vanished with a bang. Iggwilv followed a split-second after, at the same moment Zuggtmoy went, for both were now corded to the cambion.

"He is a coward," Gellor said at that, "but a quickwitted one!"

"Not smart enough, my friend," Gord replied. "That little trick which Allton and Timmil managed, remember?" The troubador nodded curtly, although Leda looked puzzled. "A magical means of pursuit," Gord explained to her tersely. "That feat was nothing compared to what I can manage now, Gellor. Hold onto your harp, there — and you to the

Theorpart, Leda. I'll force a pathway to wherever the bloated scum has fled."

The hellish battle surrounding them was gone in a heartbeat. Graz'zt and his minions would now have things their own way, for the invading force was left to its own means, just as Demogorgon had deserted his horde when Gord had stripped Infestix of the relic and that daemon had been sent howling away to his own nethersphere. "He planned to slay us for the Theorparts, you know," Leda said. Her voice echoed weirdly in the non-space the three were now sailing through.

"Of course. It was if he waved a banner proclaiming his intentions overhead even as the lout thought to dissemble," Gord laughed. "He didn't have any idea of this outcome — or of the true powers of either his Theorpart or my Courflamme here."

"A little music will soothe us all." Gellor announced, and he began to play an air with piercingly sweet high notes floating above a rippling bass. "It is a chaconne which speaks of the perfidy of demons. I had meant if for the six-fingered one when he thought to devour our souls; now it seems appropriate to our circumstances."

The end of the quasi-space came just at that point it was evident to Gord that his comrade had been aware of their imminent arrival in the domain of the cambion. "A true hero, you grizzled old trouper!" he managed to call as the three were wrenched into the new place.

It took them a moment to gain their bearings and calm their senses. The shock wasn't merely from the jolt of leaving the distorted passageway that Gord had wrought in part it was caused by the place they found themselves in. Iuz had chosen to flee to the great stratum of the fungi queen, Zuggtmoy. They were in a nightmare place, a realm that could only be likened to some great underground cavern where fantastic and weird fungi sprouted from noisome soil, and nothing clean had ever existed.

"Mycorji." The name came to Gord's mind, and he spoke it aloud. "This is the stinkhole of Zuggtmoy."

"Where have Iuz and his whores gotten to?" Leda asked. Her voice bore a heavy tone of hatred. Shared memories, those of the dead Eclavdra, caused the burden of hatred to well up in her and burst out as she spoke.

"Not far," Gellor said with assurance, as he continued to play. The sound of his melodious fingerwork was rotting the tall, disgusting growths all around. As the things toppled and ran into putrid puddles, there was clearly revealed the entrance to a grotto that lay below the place where the three now stood. "See there?"

"I do," Gord nodded. "Let's finish this work quickly," he said, and the three of them began descending immediately. The silvery notes from the bard's kanteel announced their coming, of course, even as did the heaps of deadly fungi that collapsed from the sound.

Iuz was like a cornered rat. His fangs were bared, and the half-demon was desperate, filled with a deadly mixture of fear and hatred that might just prove sufficient to serve. Seeing the diamond and jet of Courflamme, the cambion willed a larger and deadlier blade from his Theorpart. The relic responded, of course, and suddenly Iuz was holding a huge scimitar, a weapon that required both hands and a bulk such as the cambion had to wield its five-foot length. Even as that massive blade sprang into being, the half-demon was attacking, bringing the curved mass of razor-edged metal up and around in a blow meant to decapitate his opponent.

There was no warning shout, no sound, as Iuz swung the scimitar. Pure reflex saved Gord. The cambion towered above the champion, half again his height, three times and more heavier. Shadow armor and elfin mail would never have prevailed against the sorcerous steel of the blade Iuz swung.

Gord flinched into a crouch, and the rubine metal hissed a hairsbreadth above his head, trailing coruscations of lambent maroon in Its wake. Still crouched, Gord lunged inward with a long thrust aimed at the fat, angry pink of Iuz's thigh. The stabbing attack failed to reach its target, and the massive scimitar was surely being brought around for a backhand stroke. Without trying to recover from his lunge, the young champion simply fell to the right, rolled on his shoulder, and did a back flip. The evil red of the scimitar's blade cut through the space where he had been a second before, then flashed its hellish track upward and around toward where Gord now stood.

Iuz stopped the arcing blade suddenly, poising the scimitar as a high-held threat above his right shoulder. "You are quick, you little human flea!

Hopping will only prolong the contest, though. You'll be too slow soon enough — then I'll feed your raw and bleeding genitals to your friends!"

The goading was obvious and useless. Gord didn't bother considering the words at all; he was intent upon estimating the cambion's speed, reach, and tactics. Gord feinted, withdrew, cut, and danced back and Iuz did not move. Then Gord sent a sparkling dart of force from Courflamme. Iuz moved very quickly at that, and the angry carmine web that sprang from the scimitar seemed to devour the blacksilver bolt. "You move quickly yourself, pink shoat," Gord called as he stepped well back.

The sting of the force that had managed to get through the Theorpart's screening energy made the cambion furious. "So you like to trade missiles, do you?" he grated through his clenched teeth. His halfhundred little fangs gleamed bone white as Iuz's lips were drawn back in rage. With those words, the halfdemon willed a fiery crimson whip to spring from the weapon he wielded, and the snapping filaments of force shot forth like a cat o' nine tails.

Gellor, meanwhile, was fully occupied against Zuggtmoy. More than fully, as it were. The demoness had resumed her fungoid form, but the puffy white appendages she plied to operate her strange device were faster than human fingers. Out shot paralyzing rhizomes, jets of flesh-dissolving spores, ranks of myconid monsters as she played upon the powers of her Cauldron of Corruption. At each new threat the bard countered with music that neutralized or destroyed the attack.

The ivory kanteel was potent, a match for the vile device Zuggtmoy employed. In time, though, demon strength would prevail over that of mortal sort, albeit Gellor was heroic and imbued with strength and power of supernatural kind. His adversary was, after all, one of the six greatest demons in the whole sphere of demonium.

The troubador played with determined desperation. Zuggtmoy merely kept her endless series of assaults flying from the Cauldron, biding her time with assured expectation, almost enjoying the contest. Wondering if blinding smut might prevail, the demoness triggered a whirlwind cone of the stuff from the device. Notes as bright and hot as the summer sun at high noon frizzled the dark cloud into nothingness, but the stain of the smut's demise lay only inches from the bard's booted feet. Soon, soon . . .

"Turncoat bitch!" Iggwilv spat. Leda faced the ancient witch with no expression, and that calmness disconcerted Iggwilv. "Use the Initiator on that sorry little man," the hag commanded, pointing her wand at Gord as he nimbly danced around Iuz, "and I'll see to it that you rule with us!"

Eclavdra's memories saved her. From deep inside her brain, Leda heard the warning. "That is the Baton d'Agrue, and its malign workings are not direct." Even with the alert, the terror and shaking that stole over her from crown to sole came before Leda could use her Theorpart to defend herself, let alone attack the witch. The little dark elf reeled back legs nearly beyond her control, hands trembling so badly that she almost lost her hold on the misshapen metal of the evil relic that was her only hope against Iggwilv.

"Hee, hee, hee!" the eldest witch cackled. The sound was more grotesque because it issued from the ravishingly beautiful, if depraved-looking, face of a young woman, the favorite alter-form of Iggwilv. "You didn't know that this twisty little stick never works where it's pointed, did you? Hee. hee!"

She waved the convoluted wand here and there, muttering as she did so. Vile terrors oozed forth, collected at the witch's feet, then began to creep and crawl toward the palsied girl. "Now for my piece de resistance!' she cried, and the wand began to vomit horrifying matter that fed the things that came toward her victim relentlessly.

It required all of her will, but Leda managed to shake off the panic that turned muscle to jelly, mind to gibbering lunacy. Her little fingers closed fast on Initiator, and the chill shock of its dark energies ran through Leda. The force coalesced in her brain, and from there she sent forth a wave of loathing.

The monstrous collection of gruesome things that was itself now an entity was struck by the force as a tidal wave strikes exposed shore. Back, up, over its many-formed body it went, splattering bits of itself and the noisome matter that fed it in gobbets of nauseating spray. Iggwilv was caught unprepared for such a turn, and although she dissolved her work as quickly as she could, the remains spattered her, burned her with their acidity, even as the disintegrating main body of the stuff struck the witch. It bowled her over and then was gone.

"No, you degenerate old crone," Leda hissed as she stood straight and held forth the Theorpart as steadily as an artist might hold a brush to a

masterful canvas. "Let the two of us see just how potent are the forces we command."

Gord dared not allow Courflamme to impact upon the ruby-hued scimitar formed from the might of the Awakener. The relic could not be destroyed, save perhaps by Tharizdun himself. Gord now understood, from his experience with Infestix, that great as was the strength of the artifact of Balance, It could not withstand even a third of the evil relic, not in such direct manner. Courflamme's powers were greater than the Theorpart's own, but in a different form.

Rather than trying to sever the whiplike tentacles that lashed forth at him, Gord caused a mesh of crystal and soot-black weave to spring into being in the air between himself and the cambion. The deep red of the snakelike stuff struck the web of white and black LIvid carmine devoured strand after strand of the mesh, but as fast as it did so, more grew. Soon the whip was enmeshed, woven fast into a growing web.

But just as Gord was feeling positive, Iuz struck again. One instant, the half-demon's sword was held fast by the interplay of forces; the next, Iuz was striking at Gord with his own enchanted two-handed sword. The dirty-hued blade hit hard, sheared through the shadow plate, and snapped the silvery links of elfin mall beneath. The force drove Gord down, sprawling, his grip on Courflamme broken. The sword of Balance, however, remained where it was, horizontal, floating four feet above the muck of the grotto's floor, locked in its own duel with the scimitar-Theorpart. Disarmed, bruised, bleeding, only half conscious, Gord rolled and scrabbled, trying to get away.

Iuz had simply loosed his hold on Awakener, leaving it to contest with the enmeshing energies from the weapon of Balance. The cambion had his own sword, a long blade of demoniac forging, and this he used to spring his sudden onslaught upon his small adversary. Its blow was meant to cut the man in two at the waist. It gave Iuz only a moment's pause when the stroke failed to do as it had been meant. Then, with a bellow of killing lust and delight at what was to occur, Iuz leaped to straddle his fallen foe. "The thrust which strikes true!" the half-demon shouted with glee and excitement as he held the two-handed sword like a dagger, striking down to pierce Gord through his guts and pin him like a bug.

Some distance away, Iggwilv screeched in pain and rage. The terrible matter from the Baton d'Agrue had eaten away most of her silken garments, singed away her hair, blistered and pocked her flesh. Never had such a thing happened to her! Still voicing her awful ululations, the eldest of witches sprang to meet the hated drow. She would jam the wand down Leda's throat and choke her to death with its torrential emission of energy.

Instead of the dark elven priestess, however, Iggwilv leaped upon something else altogether. Seeing what her enemy intended, Leda used the Theorpart to form a barrier to intercept the charge of the infuriated witch. The power of Initiator was such that it went beyond a mere screen. The malign evil of the artifact brought forth a rack of iron spikes. The myriad needles of the thing caught the beautiful form that was that assumed by Iggwilv and turned it into a red ruin. Now the howling from the crone's throat was only of pain.

The agony made Iggwilv forget all about her former desires. Now all she wished was surcease of torment, and escape. Without thinking, Iggwilv thrust with both of her hands, desperately trying to pull her painwracked body from the terrible daggers that pierced it She had quite forgotten the Baton d'Agrue. Her mindless struggle brought the twisted wand into hard contact with what was essentially the force of the Theorpart. The baton was broken, consumed by that energy. As the thing was destroyed in a roar of conflicting forces, the rampant flux of energy devoured Iggwilv entirely. In one terrible roaring flash, the mother of all witches was no more.

"Aaahr That was all Leda could manage. No oath, no words could form. Something in Iggwilv's eyes at the moment of destruction, the sound of her final agony, made the dark elven girl shudder and draw back in disbelief. It was too terrible an end, even for one such as the witch had been.

Leda almost felt sympathy, remorse. Then she shook herself. No! Whatever fate had taken Iggwilv, the vile hag had brought upon herself. . . . What of Gord? Gellor? Leda turned, and her eyes fell upon the bard first where he was dueling with the mass of Zuggtmoy's fungoid bulk he plucking silvery strings, she manipulating her device of evil. The demoness was near to overwhelming Gellor — that was plain from the ever nearer thrusts issuing from the Cauldron of Corruption. Then Leda heard the cambion's shout of triumph and spun to see what had befallen Gord.

"Nooo!" She screamed as she saw Iuz jump and straddle the fallen champion. As she cried that denial, the dark elf sent the Theorpart flying from her hand. It spun through the air with the susurration of a thousand midge-sized imps tittering at some vast distance as if in diabolic delight.

The eerie sound of its passage made the cambion hesitate a split-second before he brought the huge sword down to pierce Gord's vitals. "Whang!" The sound of the alien metal as it impacted upon the sword's dingy blade was so loud that the halfdemon's eardrums nearly ruptured. The force of the impact moved the point of the weapon, so that when Iuz reflexively thrust it down, the tongue of the blade sank nearly its full length into the soft compost of the grotto's floor. The cambion, thrown off balance by the shift in the sword-stroke, pitched into an off-balance somersault. "Uuff!" was the sound Iuz made as he slammed down on his back.

Gord couldn't hear that, for he was temporarily deafened from the noise of the impact of Initiator upon the cambion's two-handed sword. The cry from Leda still sang in his mind, though. As he saw the sword come down, miss, and bury its length, the young champion knew that he had been given a last chance by the love of the little dark elf and her desperate act. Leaping erect, hardly pausing to note Iuz's distress, Gord took one step and grabbed Courflamme's diamond-and-jet banded hilt. "Good for Evil," he cried softly, and the sword separated in twain. A bright crystalline blade remained locked in contest with the rubine scimitar that was Awakener, but into Gord's gauntleted hand came a shining brand of nighted hue.

Seeing her love thus armed, Leda turned again to where Gellor fought against the terrible demoness. What could she accomplish against the mighty demon queen? Leda had many powerful spells upon which she could call. These were potent in terms of men, but against the force of Zuggtmoy, such dweomers would be paltry things indeed. Yet she had no other weapon with which to attack. . . . Leda decided to try a tactic that might work.

"Hear me utter your true name, O Zuggtmoy, Empress of Blights, and harken! You will not disregard this call, nor will you disobey my command. By the Black Votary I summon you, Zuggtmoy, and with the Bonds of Exaction do I fetter you. Hear and obey. Queen of Thallphytia, Mistress of Mycorji. You are but a demoness subject to my will. ..."

Immersed as she was in the battle with the bard and his magical harp, Zuggtmoy was superficially unaware of the casting of the evocation of binding. The words that Leda was chanting but a few yards distant might well have been said a thousand leagues away, for all the demoness actually heard. Yet the words, each with its charge of dweomer, did enter the mind of the fungoid being, and as these utterances accumulated there they began to niggle away. The spell being cast was not one that could ever demand full obedience from one as powerful as she, yet Zuggtmoy was affected nonetheless.

In other circumstances, had she not been engaged in a deadly battle, for instance, Zuggtmoy might have heard and answered — to wreak unspeakable revenge upon any so foolish as to annoy her thus. But the demoness was not free, and the incantation had an impact upon her. As the long strings of words was said, and the rite progressed, the gnawing of their message finally broke through from the subconscious of her brain to that part of Zuggtmoy's mind that was occupied in the fight with Gellor.

"What? Who dares?" came the telepathic demand from the disturbed demoness. The power of that blast of mental energy was sufficient to break Leda's casting. It knocked the little dark elf down, In fact, and wounded her with its force. But the distraction of the fungi queen was enough so that Zuggtmoy faltered in her complicated series of attacks upon the one-eyed bard.

That allowed Gellor to recover lost ground. In the second or two gained thus, the troubador sent his rippling melodies forth with renewed vigor, and the doom that encroached all around him was beaten back, withered, and decayed. "Thank you, Lady," he whispered as he saw Leda gasp and fall. "This will be for you," he added as his fingers fairly flew in sweeping circles across the silver strings of the kanteel. For all Gellor knew, the dark elf had died in order to help him, and it seemed likely that the demoness would soon slay him, too. Despite that, the troubador meant to make the victory as costly and painful as possible.

Zuggtmoy's bulk actually shuddered as the music swept over it. What was inimical to her fungi was hurtful, if not fatal, to the demoness. Cursing bard and drow for the piercing torments she now suffered, Zuggtmoy set to work on her Cauldron of Corruption with redoubled effort. Pay — she would make these mortals pay and pay!

"And Evil to Evil!" Gord shouted that cry as he took the lightless portion of Courflamme and faced Iuz. The cambion was groveling, on his knees, frantically trying to haul his great sword from its sheath of loamy stuff. In his anxiety and haste, Iuz was careless about how and where he grabbed the weapon, and his long, steely-fingered hands were cut and bloody from where they had contacted the sword's keen edge.

"Now, Now!" Iuz shrieked in relief and Joy as he finally managed to stand upright, grasp the length of the two-handed sword's hilt, and again be armed to attack in his dark mind, the cambion knew that this time he would not fall. With a grimace of evil certainty, Iuz spun to where he knew his opponent was.

Gord's words were spoken at that moment. The inky metal of Courflamme fairly danced within itself as it leaped forward to sheathe itself in the red-pink body of the gross half-demon. In Courflamme shot, piercing lung, vein, artery, heart, and the cambion s hide on the other side as it had its way with the thing's body on its upward journey. Out it came, as quickly as the dead-black blade had entered, and only a sundry few of the cambion's innards were further damaged by the withdrawal. It occurred so quickly that the vaunted Lord of Pain had felt hardly a twinge.

Iuz stood still for a second, shocked as realization dawned suddenly in his brain. Then he tried to bring up the massive sword he still held in his lacerated hands. "You . . . little . . . mortal fool! You can never slay .. . me . . . Iuz . . . thus! I'll. .. I'll. . And then the words Iuz was tiying to speak were cut off by a gush of foul, maroon blood from deep inside his body. Even then, the spawn of Iggwilv was not through. Spewing the ichorous gore as he came, Iuz advanced like an automaton, leaden foot after leaden foot, sword trembling but rising higher for a last blow against this small human who had killed him.

"And from Evil, all Evil!" Gord shouted again. The ebon longsword darted out and took Iuz full in the throat. The cambion's eyes were mad with fear at that, for the terrible sword would drink from him all existence. Iuz tried to move, tried to avoid that last, truly finishing thrust. But there was no counterpart of Leda to save the fiend from his deserved end. Courflamme struck, and the corpse of Iuz crashed down upon the moldering floor of the grotto. Nevermore would the cambion rise from that grave.

At that, the dark length of Courflamme shot from Gord's hand and flew to merge once again with its crystalline twin. The diamondlike half had been slowly dimming, and its inner light had become sluggish as the bane of the scimitar-Theorpart worked through it. The rejoining changed that in an instant. The whole that was now Courflamme shimmered, and the interplay of light and dark with the adders of flaming scarlet hue suddenly ceased. Down fell the scimitar with a dull thud. Down fell Iuz's sword. Courflamme too dropped, but it came down point first, burying itself but a little, standing in victory above its foe. Where the curved blade of the red-hued scimitar had lain was now the convoluted metal of the relic called the Awakener. Nearby lay the Initiator which Leda had thrown to save her champion from certain death.

Gord picked up Awakener in his right hand. Initiator in his left. Ignoring the beckoning hilt of Courflamme, the champion of Balance turned to where his comrades struggled desperately against the demoness. "Zuggtmoy!" he shouted, and Gord's voice filled the whole of the grotto with such commanding sound that a god would have trembled at it.

Startled, the demoness looked up from her deadly little kettle. What she observed through her dull eyespots made Zuggtmoy quake. The mass of her fungoid form, elephantine in proportion, disgusting in shape, shook as if convulsed. "Stay! Spare me, and—" She had seen the corpse of Iuz, sensed the destruction of the witch, now observed the twin Theorparts pointed directly at her. In that moment Zuggtmoy knew her end was also near, and with desperation the greatest of demonesses sought to plead for her existence.

"No," was all Gord whispered at Zuggtmoy's first utterances. Two jagged rays issued from him, each Theorpart sending forth its killing force. The twin beams struck Zuggtmoy squarely, and nothing remained of the queen of fungi thereafter.

If a deep and hollow laughter rolled faintly through the grotto then, Gord ignored it.

Chapter 12

"WHERE IS LEDA?" It was more a demand to know than a question.

"What? I don't know," Gellor stammered, still dazed by the sudden blaze that had destroyed the demoness. "Leda was there," he said, pointing to a place on the grotto's floor. "She sent some dweomer to Zuggtmoy to distract the demoness, I think. I felt the rebuke and force of Zuggtmoy's counter to that. Leda was stunned by the attack, but it enabled me to fight back — to stay alive! Then I lost track because I was again fully occupied in the duel."

Gord ran to the place his comrade indicated. The soft stuff of the floor retained impressions of heel marks and an indentation where a small, mail-clad form might have lain. "Help me search, Gellor," he called. "You have far more skill at such work than I."

Only their own tracks entering the place led back to the stairway. "She must be somewhere in this grotto," the troubador ventured. "Leda hasn't left this way."

"No. She isn't here. I can read nothing of her — no thoughts, not a glimmer of her aura. She has . . . gone!"

"You don't think . . . ?" Gellor didn't finish the question, for the thought was too painful for him, let along his young friend.

There was steel in the young champion's voice as he filled in the words. "That she was blasted in the conflagration which consumed Zuggtmoy? Not if she was where you said she fell." Gord paused, then went to the place again. Small foot-marks were there, and the steps went toward the spot where the fungoid demoness had squatted. "By the gods, no! It can not be!"

Gellor came to stand beside him. Then, feeling inadequate, looking for something, anything to alleviate the tension, the bard studied the area. His enchanted eye saw far more than Gord's own eyes did, even with the paranormal perceptions the champion now possessed.

"Gord! You are right! See?" Gellor pointed to a place and watched his comrade's face. Gord's bleak expression didn't change. "You can't see? Well, I do clearly enough, old friend. Leda went no farther than this spot. The blast which devoured Zuggtmoy couldn't have harmed her; the distance is too great."

"Then tell me where her footprints lead!"

Gellor stooped, peered, then arose shaking his iron-streaked locks. "Leda's steps end here. She went nowhere beyond this spot, not even backward. Here her trail simply vanishes!"

Gord took some small comfort in that. "At least she is not dead — from anything which took place here, anyway. We must find her, but I can't search properly from this place. Watch for any enemies while I gather the Theorparts and reclaim Courflamme."

It required only minutes to do that. Then Gord and the bard emerged from the underground place to the hardly different surface of what had been the domain of the queen of demon fungi. The atmosphere was redolent with sickly odors, and a keening filled their ears. As the two emerged, a thousand monstrous things moved. They had been drawn to the surging violence, the dark forces at play in the battle, but had been kept at bay by the dweomer of Gellor's mighty kanteel. Now the demon creatures were wailing their loss to fear and hopelessness. The very stuff of Mycorji was churning, pitching, and rolling in earthquake heaves, splitting and crumbling. The grotto was the epicenter, and the waves of despair ran outward, sweeping in growing circles to inform all the demons of the great stratum about the death of Zuggtmoy.

"This is no place to scry, either," Gord said with disgust. "The shock of what has occurred will be transmitted to the whole of the Abyss soon — if the lords of demonium don't know already."

"Yes. Not only this sphere but the whole of the netherworlds will be aware of the deaths of their own soon." Gellor counted the toll. "First the two old demons, Shabriri and Pazuzeus, and their master, the demonurgist Gravestone. . . . That alone should have been sufficient warning to put our evil foes on guard."

"Their own greed and hateful desires blinded them to the certainty of the ancient prophecy, I think" Gord noted.

"Then Nerull nearly met death — the thing he is supposed to be lord of," the bard said, nearly laughing as he spoke that. "You plucked the Theorpart from him as if he were no more than a lamb." Gord nodded, saying that it was the unexpected force of Courflamme which surprised the daemon. Gellor went on with his list. "Besides the various and sundry demons and

their beasts and brutes we have made into fertilizer, the foes must now toll their dirges for Zuggtmoy of the Abyss, Iuz of demonium and Oerth, and Iggwilv the Mother of Black Witches."

"And along with that roster goes the second portion of the artifact, my friend. There will be much frenzy and ranting, I think, amongst the demons' councils now. Yet we are missing Leda. That is intolerable. I must get to a place where I can use the powers of these relics to search for her."

"Unless I have confused the intelligence which was given me, Gord, I think there is a place deep herein which even the demonlords avoid. We can venture there for respite."

Gord nodded. "With our force, we'll have no trouble there — for a short time. No longer can our location be disguised, though, so we must be quick and be ready. The demons will seek us out wherever we go now, for the Theorparts must be regained by them, or else in their view all will be lost."

"Can they do that?"

"No," the young champion responded simply. "Let them think it, though. Then they will bring Unbinder to us."

* * *

To say that there was consternation among the rulers of demonium would be far too reserved. With the death of Zuggtmoy and the sudden change of balance caused by the loss of the Theorpart, a shock ran through demonium and impacted all of the other lower spheres too. The great battle with Graz'zt came to a sudden, unprecedented cessation. Although demons do not surrender, the great lords who were desperately opposing the ebon demonking were shocked into asking for quarter and parley. It was unthinkable for the haughty Graz'zt to accept, for his enemies were in the palm of his six-fingered hand. But though he did not acknowledge the request, a short time thereafter Graz'zt ordered all of his forces to cease attacking. After a few thousand more of the foe were slain in reactive situations, and a few of Graz'zt's own troops who would not stop were cut down by commanders enforcing the demonking's order, the battlefield became silent.

"The foundations of our world are undermined," Baphomet bellowed with a distress that transmitted to each demon-heart beating there. "Worse

than Tharizdun, may that name be forever in chains, would be the hegemony of the neither hot nor cold pap of the neutral ones."

"Hear me!" The demand was from Orcus, suddenly returned to the place of conflict. "I am come to pledge my whole strength to a cause no demon can deny!"

"Speak demonking. We listen!" That response from Graz'zt was met by roaring agreement from the assembled beings of demonium.

In the next hour, three of the greatest of the Abyss and thirty times that number of princes and lords of demonium also voiced their burning words. Whether already arrayed there on the former battlefield or newly come from some other place within the Abyss, these arrogantly independent lords of demonium vowed to band together to fight a common enemy.

Of the five remaining monarchs of demonium, four finally pledged to the cause. Zuggtmoy was gone, of course. Only Arachne, the Spider Queen, withheld joining. Demogorgon was, naturally, reticent but eventually went along with Graz'zt, Orcus, and Marduk Fully two thirds of the princes and lords, the masters of the strata, tiers and regions of demonium's vast reaches, did likewise when the great gathering was held on Mezzafgraduun several days afterward. The stupid lesser sorts of demons were uncaring. Those of greater power were uncertain, but the rulers of demonium were filled with a determination.

They would again fight and try to slay each other, as soon as possible. One or more of them would possibly have the advantage of the Theorparts. All of that was as it should be. The demonkings had long ago determined two things: the Abyss would remain a place wherein their kind would rule by the whim of the strongest, and the tripartite relic of the great AllEvil would remain there to assure that.

Evil the demons were and always would be, but evil independent of any overlord, save possibly one of their own who was able to bind them ... for a time! Always the wheel turned, and no ruler was safe from overthrow. Tharizdun would never lord it over the Abyss, not while its masters were still in existence and able to resist. Neither would mortals, or morethan-mortals, enter the reaches of demonium and freely slay and take from its greatest what was theirs.

Did the reputed champion of Balance actually desire masteiy of all the Abyss? No matter; his possession of the two Theorparts, combined with the other terrible powers he and his associates bore, were sufficient threat to silly the demon masters against them. Was the man actually an agent of Tharizdun? That seemed possible, too, but the answer made no difference to any of the demons concerned. It was sufficient to know that he was an enemy! After the initial truce on the field from which Zuggtmoy, Iuz, and Iggwilv had fled, whence Orcus had likewise run in panic and then returned with furious determination, where Graz'zt had himself made common cause with his forever-foes, the demons went to the ebon demonking's domain to hold their council.

As noted, this was days later, as men measured time. Graz'zt and others of the great demons wondered how it passed that they were given so long a period to meet, organize, and formulate defenses. The three interlopers possessed sufficient force to have confronted the wielder of the third Theorpart and taken it, even though Graz'zt had the support of the Eye of Deception, his hordes, the Abat-dolor warriors, even the assistance of Orcus and the others of his foes now came over to his side. Each day, however, granted the demons a slightly improved chance to resist, a greater possibility of actually turning the tables and taking the two relics from the man who had them. Why did he hesitate? The question was asked and asked again. No answer came, but even demons don't decry fortune.

"You have the Unbinder, Graz'zt. You must lead us." That came from the three other demon monarchs there, voiced by Orcus as their spokesdemon. "I will be at your right, of course, because of my own relic," he added, displaying the Rod of Unlife with which he ruled the demons of air. "Marduk and his Firefan are with me, as are Demogorgon and his Venomfountain, so the demons of fire and water are at your right hand too."

After Marduk and Demogorgon voiced their agreement with the statement, Orcus stepped back, and Graz'zt announced that his reinstated consort, Elazalag, would stand on the left, bearing the Eye of Deception. There she would command the host of demonlords and a score of minor objects of power that those great demons possessed. If a fraction of the demonic objects of power — Zuggtmoy's Cauldron, to name one — were not there, then nothing could be done now. The power of all these minor objects combined was no match for what the enemy would bring, but a

million and more demon warriors counted for something. At some point, sheer weight of numbers would perhaps come into play. In such event, the masters of demonium would unquestionably hold the upper hand.

"The humans can perhaps gather a few thousand of the beasts, a hundred of the brutes, but that is insufficient," the six-fingered demonking cried with hatred. "Our force will crush them in open battle."

"If we must go to them. Graz'zt." Princess Elazalag said, "then your estimates are wrong. We will never manage to march all of our force to where they lurk in the depths, and in time this alliance will begin to crumble."

"If we go to them." Orcus said, "they will be at a great advantage, for the powers they command can maintain the calling of endless streams of the mindless things inhabiting those tiers, and our relics are less potent in the sinks as well."

Suddenly a dark, amorphous shape coalesced in the very midst of the assembly of terrible demons. Then allow me to Join you and assist," it said in a voice as heavy as a mountain, as slow and final as extinction. "For I have the power to force the enemy to come to you."

* * *

For too long a time Gord and Gellor had remained in the depths of demonium. It was not by the bard's choice that they did so. Gellor asked, then urged, and finally pleaded. His words fell upon seemingly unhealing ears, for his comrade made no response. Gord spoke often and with emotion, but not about their leaving the place. It was a nightmare wilderness, a place as agitated and ugly as a worldly retreat might be serene and beautiful in its lonely uninhabitation. Yet the champion remained there, meditating, scrying, and seemingly taken by alternating fits of depression and reflective musing expressed in long, mournful soliloquies.

"The toll is endless. First my parents, poor Leena, all of my old comrades and associates — Dohojar, Barrel, Timmil, Allton, Chert, dear old Curley Greenleaf. No friend, no love, no one can survive once exposed to me."

"I survive!" the troubador said firmly in rejection. "I am here with you now. We have to go on, and we must hurry! No war is won without

casualties, Gord. We have always been fighting that war, aware of it or not. The whole struggle now rests with us. The victory is in your hands."

"Victory?" At that, Gord seemed to shrink into himself. "No guarantee of a win, none at all. All that is said is that a champion will face Tharizdun as the only hope of keeping the cosmos free of an unending night of evil. You and I are doomed, I think, either way. Now Leda is gone. She is lost forever. ..."

"Why say that? Come on, man! Where is your courage?"

"Died with the rest," was the self-pitying, lethargic reply. "You know the hopelessness of it all. I have used all of the energies of the Theorparts and Courflamme. No trace, no trace. She is passed into realms beyond any ken of such power as that. . . just like Basiliv. Who will be next?"

Gellor shook his young friend by the shoulder. "See? Think on what you just said. It is the clue we needed. The enemy responsible for the loss of the Demiurge is the very same who has managed to cany off Leda. All we need —"

"All? You know that there is no hope of Basiliv's return. He is gone — gone forever, do you hear?" The words were filled with cold despair. "If he fell to the same one responsible for Leda's taking, what matter then? It only means that she is lost as surely."

"And what if Tharizdun is the agency? What if the benighted one has somehow managed to inflict such things upon us? Do you surrender before the fight even commences?"

Gord slumped into silence for long minutes, but Gellor remained, waiting. "Yes ... no ... I cannot say. All courses now seem useless. It does not matter if I Join the three portions now, for I have no desire to remain alive."

"There is the small matter of the rest of the multiverse," Gellor supplied with burning sarcasm.

He might as well have been speaking to a stump, for the young champion seemed not to hear. Gord lapsed into another of his silences and remained thus for what seemed to Gellor an endless period. Then, without appearing to notice that his comrade was waiting expectantly near, Gord rose and

wandered off. Gellor got up to follow, but at that the gray-eyed man turned and spoke. "I need to be by myself. Stay where you are."

"This is stupid, Gord! DIvide our force in this place of horrors? That is insanity! I should be there to watch, seeing as how you are—"

"I am moved by a purpose now, Gellor. Mind your own ass while I'm gone. Stay on guard, and stay put," he admonished. There was a ring in Gord's voice that belied the hopelessness that had previously seemed to pervade the young champion's soul. "I will return to you as soon as possible, and be ready. I think I have come up with something which might explain all of this."

Gellor was at a loss, but he did as his friend ordered. Short time or long, there was nothing else to do but await Gord's return.

* * *

The Lord of Entropy was keenly aware of what had transpired in the depths of demonium. It was he who had subtly influenced the young champion of Balance — beginning with his removal of the stunned Leda from the grotto of Zuggtmoy. Then Entropy insinuated the lethargy, covering Gord with it as night steals after the fading illumination of a long summer twilight.

All the skeins of Entropy's terrible plan were now nearly woven into the tapestry of his designing. The spinning had taken long, but time was one thing he had. Time worked in Entropy's favor. The many conflicts and destruction, death and decay too, each and all were in the fabric. Tharizdun must arise, but only after the whole of his new domain was in shambles. The Ultimate Evil would have a short reign thereafter, as the last energies of the multiverse dwindled and stasis slowly came. In a few eons, then, only Entropy would remain, as master of a cold, lightless nothingness. That was all he desired, for he was, after all, Entropy.

First aiding one faction, then another, the Lord of Stasis had worn all of them down and hastened the day of the coming of his victory. All the while, those who denied his victory thought they were succeeding in their own plans. They were wrong, quite mistaken indeed, but that was all part of the weaving Entropy labored over.

In the final analysis, there was no doubt that Tharizdun was a desirable tool. After all, such evil was destructive in the extreme. The negative forces, death, despair, and destruction that arose with the greatest of the malign could only hasten the triumphal coronation of the last ruler of the multiverse. Evil would spread over all, and behind that shroud would stalk the Lord of inertia, Master of Devolution, and not even Tharizdun would realize that the crowning achievement of Evil was but a brief glory leading to its own ashen nothingness. Entropy would inevitably come into his cosmic realm, but by working thus, acting counter to his own definitions, he had brought the event forward by a billion years at least. Deep inside itself, Entropy felt a slow stirring of content, then allowed it to die.

"Yes," the being said slowly. "I have that which will cause your foe to come to you. He will be fought where you choose, and the attack will be weakened by his own emotions."

"Who speaks thus?"

"What are you?"

"Kill the spy!"

Those shouts and more came from the mass of demonic nobles gathered, but they meant nothing to Entropy. None there could harm him. Nothing could. Without bothering to reply. Entropy caused Leda to appear from where he had kept her in his secret realm. "This little dark elf is the thing most dear to the one who serves Balance as champion — Gord, the wielder of the two Theorparts you would have."

Vuron whispered to Graz'zt. "That being before us — he is one I know of! He is Lord Entropy, enemy of all. . . all! Trust him never!"

Graz'zt accepted the identification but ignored the rest. "You are Entropy," the ebon demonking said, meaning to establish his power before the being and enhance his status with the lords of the Abyss at the same time. "We will listen to you."

The one of inertia knew what the demonking desired, and it made no difference to Entropy at all. The demons must gain the three portions of the ageless relic soon now, it thought. Then would Tharizdun come and war with demonium, hastening stillness. Chaos itself must end as the last step in the final calm of absolute sameness. "That is most wise. King of Demons,"

Entropy said. The title bestowed would help to hasten things, too. Each word and deed employed was meant to hasten the coming of Entropy's endless rule. "You and your subjects must now attend my instructions."

The being spoke, and the demons did indeed pay close attention to the ponderous statements that Entropy voiced. All efforts, all energies, all defense and attack were to be directed in but a single focus. The female drow, Leda, was to be the central point. Graz'zt was to direct the aim of the Unbinder upon her. Elazalag would use her potent Eye of Deception. So too would all the other lesser relics and artifacts of dweomer and demonic force be brought into play. The demons' foes could defeat them, would indeed do so, unless this strategy was adhered to. By the simple device of offering Leda in exchange for the two Theorparts Gord possessed, Graz'zt could succeed in winning. Otherwise, the confrontation between him and the massed demons would lead only to their defeat and the loss of Unbinder, thus uniting all three Theorparts in the small man's hand.

"He is not such a stupid fool as to allow a mere female to alter his plan for our undoing," Graz'zt heard his newly restored consort rejoin. "We will be slaughtered as a herd of lambs, without so much as the threat of a puppy to oppose the wolf."

"The single portion of the artifact you are armed with, it and all the rest of your weapons, are but rubbish before the broom of might which that oncethief and his associate bring against you. No demon can come near enough to do harm whilst the troubador renders destruction from the instrument he plays so well. The champion's sword is proof against your weapons, his twin Theorparts sufficient to devastate all the rest. If you do not follow my direction, you are doomed," Entropy pronounced. Despite the emotionless, plodding words, even the wildest of the demonlords paid heed.

"How do we accomplish this?" asked Elazalag, convinced of the dire nature of their position but uncertain of the tactic proposed.

"It is so simple as to escape any mind save my own," Entropy droned with just a touch of self-satisfaction. "He will not trust you. Even the love which moves the champion doesn't make him so stupid as that. Graz'zt will offer the exchange as follows: The priestess called Leda will be held fast by magical bonds in a large, neutral space. The one called Gord will go to her.

Seeing that she is well and not some image or duplicate, he will place his pair of relics where the dark elf was held. The force of them will prevent operation of your own objects."

"What is to prevent the little scum from taking her without leaving behind the Theorparts?" Graz'zt demanded.

"And how will he know that we won't slay him and the drow as soon as we get the two?" Elazalag chimed in.

Entropy deepened, and the demons quieted as their vitality felt the creeping of the great entity's anger. "It is child's play to set up a triggering which would bring destruction to the dark elf should the Theorparts and the drow be in proximity for more than a brief interval. As to the possibility of your treachery, Elazalag, the man has no remedy save his sword. I have examined his makeup, seen Gord's aura long and carefully. That one will trust the weapon and his own guile and craft. He will allow the exchange, believing that he will somehow wrest the three portions from you once again after he has Leda safe."

Vuron asked a simple question at that. "Could he manage such a feat?"

Graz'zt was silenced before he could snarl at his steward for daring to speak thus. "Yes," Entropy said simply, "but only if the parts were left as separate devices in the hands of indIvidual demons. "You, Graz'zt, have one, so it will be incumbent upon you to meld the three into one engine."

"That is as I had planned," Graz'zt cried with arrogant agreement. "It is as it shall be!"

"But then the darkest will be"

"Never mind," Entropy said in slow assurance. "I will send forth my own mantle to slow and enervate Tharizdun. He will never know, and by my power he will be made into dormant state unending." It was a lie so obvious and bald that none there saw it for what it was.

"Wait!" said Vuron. "What is to prevent some other agency from intervening? If the champion removes Leda and leaves the relics, why couldn't his associate somehow regain the two Theorparts for him?"

"Because I will lurk inside the dark elven priestess, and when she is freed by the proximity of the relics, so too will I be. The guarding of them is

something I can easily accomplish. No mortal can resist the drag of my being."

Graz'zt was suddenly alert. "You could easily possess the two Theorparts, then!"

"That, demon, is not possible. Great as I am, the Theorparts are paradoxical to my being, as is any magic. Entropy is the denial of any activity, even the forces of negation and evil. No, Graz'zt. You need not concern yourself with that. I above all desire you to gain the whole of the artifact."

Many other questions came thereafter, but not one concerned the reason for Entropy's desire for demonic possession of the artifact. Why should any of them ask? The lords of the Abyss were, after all, the most worthy to hold the tripartite relic. Many of the greatest in the assemblage would gladly have questioned Entropy's choice of Graz'zt as the owner of all three. None dared voice such thoughts, however, for Graz'zt did already wield Unbinder. Most questions came from the stick-thin albino, and concerned the workings of the arrangement.

"The man will sense your presence," the pale demon asserted.

"Not with all the other energy there," Entropy denied unemotionally. "I am the antithesis of power. Unsuspecting such, the humans will never suspect my presence."

"Are you so sure, nullity?"

"For time out of mind they have not in the last few years, I have often interfered directly — and not the greatest of them has suspected. Their champion is chosen for his ability to face and defeat foemen, not because of his powers of reasoning."

As the albino started a fresh question, Graz'zt silenced him. "No more, Steward. You dislike any plans but your own — especially, it seems, if the scheme gains me the prize I have so long sought after. I think you object because you see your own existence terminating with the culmination of my purpose."

"Never, my Lord," Vuron hastened to say without so much force as to appear to be in direct contradiction. "It is just that never has our strategy worked—"

"Never have you had Entropy assisting you!" the entity interjected with a deep sound brought from the void.

"And once I have the relic," Graz'zt said in a triumphant tone, "never will we again. Now is now, and it is time to act. I will follow your plan. Entropy. Let us ready for the coming sport."

Leda, unable to move or speak, still overheard the whole exchange. If only she could warn Gord away! To allow their love to interfere in his mission would be unthinkable, yet she feared that what had been said would prove true. He would exchange, thinking that with her safe and Courflamme at his side he could manage to separate the demons into warring factions, then take away each of the three portions of the artifact one by one again. She willed her muscles to respond, tried to get that part of her mind unshackled that could telepathically alert Gord to the terrible trap he was about to walk into. But her nerves refused to carry messages, her muscles remained dormant, and her psyche was bound fast and silent within.

Entropy noted the pulses from the little dark elven beauty. "Oh, no. Be calm and resigned. All will transpire as I decree now, and soon you will become one with me in an eternal quietude of inaction and unbeing. It is time for a little more lethargy, I think, so that you will be as tranquil as the blessed vacuum when the time comes for us to go out to him you adore so."

Leda tried to resist, but nothingness came, and she was consumed by it.

Chapter 13

WHEN THE SINGLE DEMON appeared, Gord was sitting as a statue, the two fused Theorparts resting across his folded legs. Just to the left and a little behind, Gellor rested in a similar position with the ivory form of the silver-stringed little harp squarely on his lap.

What disconcerted the demon most was the longsword that floated in the air, suspended with its pommel toward the champion of Balance, point aimed out. It swung as a compass needle to aim at the demon's heart, no matter how the netherbeing shifted. Gathering its bravado, the chargin demon blurted, "If I am harmed, mortal, the drow called Leda dies!"

"Do not shout, brother of Krung," Gellor said clearly and without emotion. "The champion knows why you have come, what you are going to say, even who you are and why you were chosen."

Those words made the demon shake inside himself with a combination of furious hatred and horrible fear. Because the human with the enchanted gem for an eye called the chargin "brother of Krung," it was evident that at least a part of what that one said was true. The man knew too much!

Yognath was indeed the sibling of the chargin who had dared to serve Hades. As such, he had been given the unenviable duty of bringing Graz'zt's ultimatum to the human invaders. If he succeeded in returning alive, then Yognath would be rewarded with lordship of the chargin demons, and the race would no longer be outcast and harried for Krung"s stupid alliance outside the bonds of demonium. Better to pretend absolute confidence, to ignore the strength implied in what the human had said.

"No secret that," Yognath nearly shouted in retort. "All the Abyss thunders with the achievements of Graz'zt. The name of Yognath, the great lord honored to bear his ultimatum, is carried by the very pulses of demonium. Even a fool would know the only course then possible."

"Yes, demon, the whole of this is foolery," Gellor said without inflection. "Speak the words you are commanded on pain of death to speak on Graz'zt's behalf. Say nothing else," the bard added, and his voice was steely when he added that admonition.

Yognath peered quickly at the silent man who sat with the great relics. Could he snatch the two and be away before either of these puny mortals

could stop him? Then, to use their power upon the ebon demonking, all of those who had wrought such misery upon Yognath and the rest of the chargin recently. . . . No, that was only a fleeting fantasy, and the demon knew it. The forces that radiated from both men were sufficient to warn Yognath that he would have no chance if he tried it. The only indication he even considered so doing was a slight narrowing of his eyes, a twitching in his ropy, long-taloned fingers. Then with hardly a pause, the messenger repeated what he had been sent to say. In essence it was "give Graz'zt the Theorparts, and he will give Leda back to you."

The whole of his speech was long and convoluted. Yognath stared at the unmoving champion when it was finished. The man seemed totally detached, uncaring. "Well?" the demon demanded. Still the human was as stone.

"Tell Graz'zt that Gord, champion of Balance, has heard and will come as requested," Gellor said after a long pause.

"He must speak for himself," the demon sneered.

"I am only repeating his commands, as you do those of Graz'zt" the bard informed the jeering chargin. "Go away! Do your duty — tell Graz'zt!" Gellor ordered. As if to punctuate that statement, the sword that floated before the smaller man suddenly began to pulse alternately light and dark, moving slightly closer to Yognath's scaled breast as it did so.

The chargin nearly stumbled over his own splayed feet in his haste to comply. The two men were left alone in the nightmare wilderness, still unmoving statues of alien sort in that demonic plane.

"Was it sufficient time?" Gellor finally asked.

Gord moved with a spryness and alacrity that was surprising after sitting so long in a contorted fashion. "More than sufficient, dear comrade, more than you can know! The demon is but a dupe and a dolt Nothing he supposes is correct, and much has been kept from him, so that no probe of his mind, or physical torture, could force him to reveal the secrets which his masters hold."

"Then how can you have sufficient information? What intelligence so invigorates you?"

"Much is told by not being said, Gellor," Gord said enigmatically. "Come on. Let us ready ourselves to greet a multitude of demons and free our Leda!"

Gellor shook his head while proceeding quickly to ready himself. "Two against the millions," said he as he clasped the final piece of his armor into place. "Never have there been such odds."

"We are not as alone as you think, I assure you,

Gellor. Millions can work for and against, even as a million-to-one chance."

"You are growing unbalanced, Gord. Lunatic ravings hearten me naught."

"None could gainsay madness, should I choose to adopt it as a shield. But I do not, good troubador. I merely toy with it as the demon lords would toy with us, were they able." The analogy brought sudden insight to Gellor, and his countenance displayed the fact.

"Yes, my one-eyed, open-mouthed companion, yes!" Gord went on. "I watch and listen and wait for some choice response from you, but you only babble and tell me nothing. Thus, unenlightened, I go forth to do as the black master of the Abat-dolor demands. Will you also go in the required fashion?"

It was not Gord who spied. It was natural that the demons would watch, and Gellor now comprehended what Gord was warning him of. Something did watch and listen — listen even to thoughts sent from mind to mind, else his friend would have used telepathic means to alert him. "The choice is one of staying here alone or accompanying you to the place of exchange?"

"There can be no other," Gord averred. "It isn't so glum a prospect, for who can say what will transpire after the event has rim its many-faceted course?" The words didn't convey anything useful to Gellor, and the bard shrugged to indicate that fact while moving beside the champion. "Good," his friend said, taking the troubador by his arm. "We'll stand together thus when coming before the demons." With a brief string of sounds to activate the Theorparts, Gord and his comrade then vanished from the wild depths of the Abyss.

It was on iyondagur that Leda was held. To that forsaken stratum the two men must come, bearing the two parts of the arcane key that the demons

demanded as the price of her release. Graz'zt demanded, actually, while the horde of other great and lesser demons lent support. Better for the Theorparts to be held by one of their own, of course, than by a wretched outsider.

At a place where the gray and stony barrens of iyondagur's outreaches merged toward another desolate tier of demonium was gathered the whole force of the allies. A half-hundred noble demons there were, with petty lords and demon-chiefs outnumbering them by six times, and the ranks of their warriors yet farther back and in countless hundreds of thousands. Unimaginable, frightening, and poised as a flock of raptors above some field upon which a plump hare must soon venture.

The bait was the pretty captive. Leda was standing alone, nearly naked, not tied but immobilized nonetheless. A thousand paces separated the dark elf from the hordes of warriors, half that distance from the place where their masters were waiting, and only a scant hundred from the spot where Graz'zt waited with Elazalag and Vuron. The albino grasped Unbinder — a dubious privilege but one upon which Graz'zt had insisted, with horrid threats of the consequences should Vuron not use the artifact effectively for his master's protection.

Graz'zt would have preferred to be alone, only he dared not attempt that until he secured the two other Theorparts. Doubts still slunk as jackals around the demonking's mind. Would the man be so stupid? Could the entity calling itself Lord Entropy be gulling him? Could anything go wrong? Each little thought skulked and yapped, but when one was grasped at to be considered, it ran away in fear.

"They come," hissed the albino, pointing toward a slight distortion near where the drow priestess stood.

"I am ready," Graz'zt pronounced. His voice was loud, meant to carry the intervening distance, to inform Entropy. Was that needed? Perhaps not, but the ebon demon would rather be on the cautious side.

The distortion brightened into a shimmering archway, and from the portal it formed stepped the two humans who championed Balance. It pleased Graz'zt to observe that the one called Gord carried the united pair of relics in his left hand, reserving his right for the deadly magical blade that was his badge of office as Balance's greatest hero. This was according to Entropy's

assessment. The weakling was actually going to comply! He would trade mastery of all for a mere female!

"You have answered my summons," the tall demonking said as the small man looked toward him.

"Was there ever a doubt I would?" Gord replied lightly. "I have come to do as you wish. I will place the Theorparts beside Leda now for your inspection."

Graz'zt watched closely, scrutinizing all for the least sign of trickery. There were no falsities involved. Gellor stood in place as Gord slowly paced the distance between himself and the drow, covering the hundred steps without seeming haste. Once there, the man hardly paused to examine the captive to determine her reality and state of health. No need, Graz'zt supposed. The energies of the two portions of the great relic would easily convey all such information to him in a flash — and would also report if the elfs true nature was being screened by counterdweomers from similar instruments of powerful magic. Entropy had forbade any magical shielding, for to attempt that would be to alert the champion to something, and extensive inspection might discover the presence of something . . . else . . . there with the dark elven priestess.

"Are you whole?" Gord asked.

"Yes. Gord," came Leda's reply. Her words sounded perfectly natural, and even her eyes were in accord with the answer.

"What if I took you away while keeping the Theorparts?"

"There is a geas-force within me which would annihilate me in that instant" she answered. Even at his distant place. Graz'zt felt the ring of truth in her words. As with all that transpired, the arcane energies at play magnified and made manifest each detail of all that occurred. No illusion, no sleight-of-hand substitution, nothing unseen could escape observation — nothing save the nothingness of Lord Entropy.

"Then I do freely exchange these two objects for you, Leda. As you are sound, whole, and unharmed in any form, I hand over the two relics in the same condition. Do you accept the trade, demon?"

The manner of address was infuriating to Graz'zt, but he allowed the red wash of anger to flow away. What counted was the gain. "Of course, you

know I do. It is to my tune you dance, manling!"

"Very well, then. I leave the bonded Theorparts and take the dark elf Leda in even exchange, all according to the terms and conditions just pronounced."

"So be it!" Graz'zt cried. He was echoed by a dozen demon voices, and they, in turn, were underscored by a roaring accolade from a million misshapen demon throats as the massed ranks of warriors behind took up the shout of demonium's triumph.

Leda was stunned, her mind in turmoil. Something was wrong, but she couldn't say what. She couldn't even think clearly. "Gord . . . ?"

"Never mind, dear one, never mind at all," he said reassuringly as he took her arm gently. Without a further word he walked slowly away, his back to the myriad of demonic foes packed in their phalanxes, voicing their cries of awful glee. Leda accompanied him, held steady by his arm, not sure what was going on, but becoming more and more uneasy with each step.

"No . . . no! You-"

"You!" Gord countered, and increased his pace so as to get greater distance between the two of them and the twin Theorparts. At a hundred paces he turned and said to Leda, "I know what is going on, girl. Two can plot and set traps."

"It is a . . a . . creature, a vile thing calling itself. ."

"Lord of Entropy," he finished for the distraught little elf. "I became aware, but that's a tale for later. We — you, to be exact, my love — have the remainder of this farce to play out."

"I don't understand you, Gord. What can we do? You were wrong to trade me for the Theorparts. Now all is lost!"

"Were you unharmed? Free of duress?"

Leda was adamant. "Of course not! That monstrous thing was there possessing me, making it impossible for me to act normally. I couldn't do anything of my own free will, not even blink a warning!"

"Then by the terms I offered and Graz'zt accepted, there is no bargain. Leda. The demonking struts forth now to claim what he supposes is his prize," Gord said urgently. "Entropy lurks there too, gloating. You can end

all that, but when you do, there will be a confrontation which cannot be described. Graz'zt and his minions will attack Will you fight them?"

"Of course — if I can, that is. How is it to be? What do you want me to do?" Leda was nearly dancing with anxiety and desire to rectify the wrong, redress what had happened.

"Good! Take Courflamme now. and use it well. I think it will serve you as it does me," Gord said in a low tone as the ebon demonking came within a dozen paces of the twin Theorparts.

"But . . . your blade! It is . . . Graz'zt is about to gain the thing!" Now Leda was actually bouncing, yet as she did so she instinctively reached out and took the longsword from Gord.

"And now I shall balance the scales in the bargain," the young champion said. He raised his unencumbered hands and cried aloud. "By the terms of our compact, demon, the fused portions of the relic were given as payment for a whole and unharmed captive. The prisoner was not so extant, in that she could neither reason nor speak The agreement is voided. Graz'zt!"

"Is it? IS IT??" Graz'zt boomed the last, breaking into peals of demonic laughter as he bent down, sixfingered hands swooping to clutch his hard-won prize. With the culmination of the fight, this was the sweetest and most satisfying of all the demonking's triumphs.

Entropy, gathered near to the relic, was using all of his being to maintain the nothingness surrounding the three parts of Tharizdun's artifact. The two must remain apart for a time yet before they melded into the third. It would finalize the destruction, decay, and chaos leading to the timeless peace of nullity. To assure the separation, the formless entity molded bits of himself into place around the two Theorparts already united, for their attraction was a straining power that had to be dampened. Entropy heard and understood the exchange between Gord and the demonking. of course, but it seemed as if the champion of Balance was trying to argue speciously. What matter anyway? De facto was sufficient to rule. Graz'zt would hold the thing, and then no law save the power of Evil would reign. "Grab it quickly, you fool!" Entropy intoned as rapidly as its own inert self could. Graz'zt heard, and the command galvanized him. He stepped closer, and his talonlike fingers reached out.

Leda! Instead of the thing that was the united Theorparts, Graz'zt saw the little dark elf before him, and that made even the great demonking recoil. It wasn't merely the suddenness of the exchange; Leda held the crystal and jet sword, and the instant she appeared where the relic had been, she used it.

"NO!" The denial burst forth from the ebon monarch's massive chest with a bellow of rage and dismay.

"No ... o ... o ... I" The same cry from the formless entity seemed to roll as does thunder from hill to hill as Entropy tried to deny the impossible juxtapositioning.

"No!" Leda said, but hers was another sort of denial. The little drow was voicing her rejection of Graz'zt and all demonium, and she punctuated that with a blow from Courflamme that was aimed at the demonking's chest.

"Yes!" Gord said softly in satisfaction as the two Theorparts appeared in his grasp and began to draw dark forces into play. Leda was in a dire position, and he had to act with power and speed to save her. Gord sent a blast from the conjoined Theorparts. The energy bolt struck Unbinder's length, and the Theorpart went spinning from Vuron's grasp. The cry of pain and shock from the albino demon was plain to Gord's ears over the intervening distance. That done, he called to Gellor. "At them now, comrade! We mustn't leave Leda exposed!"

Gellor was ready, and at the instant Gord shouted the troubador struck up a series of rippling chords from the kanteel. He would send forth such strains as had never before been inflicted upon the Abyss, and the demons would reel and die from the fell powers of the melodies of light and justice. Playing thus upon the ivory harp, Gellor went forth, ready to leave off the fingering of silver strings in favor of his sword when near to the wild foes. The bard knew full well that the dweomers that Gord would bring to bear upon the massed horde of demons would suffice to keep the lesser sort at bay. In the press, Gellor would meet their lords with enchanted steel and fighting skill.

Covering the distance by bounds, Gord raced to the place where Leda stood. He saw a dozen great demons leaping and running toward that place too. They understood all too well their predicament and hoped to make the little elven priestess hostage again and redress the situation thus. As he moved, Gord plied the might of the twin relics, willing all before him to

accept the mastery of himself as supreme, to cease resistance and bow before his might.

The lesser demons, the warriors and bestial fighters of but dim intelligence, quickly acceded to the mental broadcast. None of the nobles of demonium heeded such an enspelled message, of course. It seemed to add oil to the burning coals of their fury, so that these came forth with greater rage than ever to contest with their three small enemies.

So too Gellor's music. The least of demonkind were easily slain by the force of his playing, the stupid and brutish too were laid low by the sounds. Some of the more powerful ones were maimed, driven back, and would eventually be destroyed by sustained playing. The lords of demonium were but galled and pricked by the notes. Gellor understood that, so as he neared the place where great demonlords gathered to fight, he thrust the little kanteel within its case. Hoping it would remain safe where it rested at the rear of his broad girdle, the troubador drew forth his own good blade and laid into the onrushing foes.

Neither man needed to have been so concerned with Leda's fate. Even while facing the towering Graz'zt, being aware of the lurking presence of Lord Entropy, and seeing a score of mighty demonlords rushing toward her, the elven girl was undaunted. As Graz'zt bellowed his outraged denial of her sudden transposition with the melded Theorparts, Leda struck at him with Courflamme. "Bastard!" she said, truly meaning that epithet, remembering the callous cruelties and vileness of the demonking.

Courflamme seemed alive in her hands. Its hilt shaped itself to her grip, and the sword's energy flowed to fill Leda with strength and confidence. The instinctive recoiling saved him from the full force of the attack but Leda's thrust took Graz'zt at the place where his demonic plate joined, where mall and bands lay between corselet and cuirass. The point slipped between the thick plates, their overlap being no proof against such an upward stab. The dark metal links of mall beneath were rendered useless too, for the blade and the force behind it sufficed to break their interlinking. Courflamme's tip pierced the demonking's hard skin, sinking into the flesh beneath. But the thrust was too short, his backward motion too fast.

The sting of Courflamme's kiss sufficed to make Graz'zt curse the small drow and continue his retreat at the same time. "Bitch-slut! You'll be

begging for such tenderness as that little Jab you just delivered to me when this day is through!" It was but a small wound. Graz'zt meant to fulfill his promise of frightful torture, but that could wait. First he had to get away from the deadly blade. The demonking sensed the terrible dweomers bound into the sword and knew that a moderately severe blow from it could well end his existence. Graz'zt would escape its reach and regain safety. Then, as his guards dealt with things, he would take up Unbinder and return to the fray . . . with a vengeance!

The black form spun and was lost from Leda's view as a press of other great demonlords came upon her. The power of Courflamme was still with her, and within her, though. "Come on!" she cried, making a blurred line with the sword as she sent its length back and forth before her. "Come and greet this blade!" First one, then another of the huge demons did so. Courflamme sliced and bit. Marduk fell away, molten stuff streaming from a great gash in his side where the sword had slashed deeply. Nexroth soon had but one leg. Bulumuz, his face a gory ruin, staggered back, knocking three other demonlords down as he collided with them. Then the pale form of Vuron was before Leda.

"You are wounded, Leda, and this is not your fight!" The albino spoke truth in part. The melee was deadly; the dark elven girl had suffered many hurts and was bruised and cut, with blood flowing from many small wounds. "Yield to me, give over the sword, and I will guarantee quarter," Vuron said. "Resume your place beside our Lord Graz'zt, and you will be queen of all your people soon!"

Those words were spoken with a twofold purpose. Vuron was aware that Gord had come up to join the battle, and his impact drew off the others, for he held the terrible Theorparts. None of the great masters of the Abyss dared try to flee to the face of that. It was not a matter of savagery; they had no option but to attack Either they would overwhelm the small champion or else be destroyed in the attempt. To turn and run would bring swift destruction from the twin relics in any event. Perhaps as much a factor as that logical reasoning, the demonlords also were consumed with hatred for the man who dared to face them, defeat them, thus.

As the score of demons attacked Gord, Vuron had a little time to attempt his own tactic. Perhaps he could actually sway Leda. After all, he had been almost a friend to her during her enforced confinement as Graz'zt's

counselor. If that proved to be a fruitless attempt, the words had a second purpose too. Vuron needed to slow the draw's reactions, lessen her righteous anger, weaken the power that flowed between her and the terrible blade of Courflamme. The interval would also allow him to ready his own weapon, for Vuron had retrieved Unbinder in the confusion.

"Vuron! Not you!" Leda stopped the cut she had been about to deliver. "You am no longer any part of this," she spat. "Get away! Run and never let me see you again — I don't want to have to slay you, tool" As she spoke the last sentence, Leda brought Courflamme up again, readying to make good on her threat if Vuron chose not to heed her warning.

"You cannot deny your affinity to Evil, Leda. There is much of Eclavdra in you, too much ever to be other than kindred of the Abyss. Once again, forget the petty hopes and desires of mankind and take your place amongst the great ones of demonium."

"I give you my answer thus!" Leda said harshly, hacking down with the sword.

A lightless shield interposed between Courflamme and the thin demonlord. "You can't harm me with that blade, you foolish little girl!" Vuron said with confident rebuke. "I helped to make its very essence and gave it back to the puny manling you now cleave to. Now I give you a last chance. Surrender the sword; better still, turn it against Gord! Do one or the other, else I will end your life." As he made the threat, Vuron suddenly produced a weapon from behind the Theorpart-shield. The albino demon wielded a Javelinlike spear, almost an extension of his stick-thin arm, and Vuron plied it as quickly as an adder. He emphasized his words with a thrust which darted toward Leda's eyes.

The shock of the sword contacting the Theorpartshield numbed Leda's arm. The dark force of the artifact drew energy from Courflamme and from her as well. Many more such contacts, and the power of her weapon would be gone, its dark half drained by the vampiric hunger of the Theorpart. Gord had used the black power of the weapon to contest with the like force of the Theorpart when facing Iuz. Could she manage something like that? Leda knew that such was her only hope now, for Vuron was striking to kill.

"No balance in shield and spear against Courflamme," she called, speaking to the blade she now bore. "Give me Balance!" Courflamme split

in twain at that, placing a diamond-bright sword in her left hand, its negative counterpart of inky hue in the girl's right.

"What trick do you try now, ingrate? The doubling of your sword will be of no avail," Vuron called as he stabbed quickly again. This time he did his utmost to sink the barb-edged spearpoint into Leda's exposed jugular. The division of Courflamme into halves worried the albino demonlord. He was rightly confident that the evil force of the sword was not baneful to him. It was made, In part, by his own forging. Why he had done that bothered him. It had seemed a mere whim, inculcating the evil force that blighted the ancient sword so as to make it even more deadly a weapon than it had formerly been. Now he wondered if it had been some bleak fate that compelled the action. Those fleeting thoughts didn't distract him in the least. Complex and multilevel thinking was, after all, Vuron's forte.

"Ah-hah!" the albino started to vaunt as he saw his long point strike home. Then he was leaping back, drawing his arm in desperate haste, for the stab had but cut a red line on the glistening sable of Leda's neck, and she, in turn, struck back.

The cut burned, but Leda was unaffected by that. The black blade in her right hand shot straight out, sinking its point into the Theorpart-shield. It held fast, and sword and relic seemed to lock together in a hateful contest of strength. The sword could never win such a battle, for it was but a half of the full force of what it was. The effect was great, however, for it held fast the defense that Vuron had relied upon. Neither sword nor shield could be moved during the interchange of malign stroke and counterstroke of force that then occurred. At the same instant, Leda used the crystalline brand held in her left hand to sweep up and around in an arcing blow aimed at Vuron's outthrust arm. "Death to you, Vuron," Leda shouted.

He was very fast, but the bright edge of Courflamme's crystal half caught Vuron's forearm. "Eeeeyaa!" The cry of pain was drawn as a high and terrible piping from the thin demonlord's chest. Leathery, even as hard as the alabaster it resembled, was Vuron's appendage. But not even steel could have resisted the edge of the diamond-bright blade as it swept up. The stuff cut into Vuron's arm, and he drew it backward at the same moment, thus prolonging the exposure of demonhide to enchanted edge. Vuron's arm was sliced from elbow to wrist. The spear dropped from his now useless hand.

He knew it was all finished then, that the wound had done more than destroy his right arm.

"I am sorry ... so sorry, Vuron. If ever your kind could make claim to nobility, you were the only one who could do so with justice," Leda said, almost sobbing as she saw what her attack had accomplished.

"Weakling! Tarry in your work, and I'll have your skull yet," the albino demon snarled back. Even as he spoke, Vuron worked frantically to change the useless shield into some form of weapon to use against her. But the dark portion of Courflamme held leechlike to the Theorpart, and this made the arcane relic's response to Vuron's willed commands sluggish. He regretted speaking then, for Leda steeled herself and struck again. Vuron tried to hide his whiteness beneath the cover of the slowly metamorphosing Theorpart, but his body was too long, arms and legs too gangling.

"Gods!" screamed Leda, seeing the bright sword slice away the pale flesh of the demon's body, leaving a terrible and bloody rawness where skin and flesh were gone from ribside.

"Finish me now, or by the Abyss I'll flay and eat your flesh as you watch!" The agonized shriek came spilling forth as did the life-stuff of the demonlord. It was no idle threat, either. Vuron had now accomplished the change, and Unbinder was an iron-fanged thing whose ever-growing jaws were about to close upon Leda's legs.

Without hesitation, and purged of remorse too, the little elven girl took hold of Courflamme's broad hilt with both hands, allowing the useless portion of the sword to fall free, for its work with the Theorpart was finished. "To the void with you!" she shouted as she swung, and the sword severed the demon's left arm. "Now, and now! And NOW!!" Three exclamations, three hacking blows with Courflamme. Vuron's headless and dismembered corpse littered the battleground there in demonium, and the albino lord of the Abyss was no more.

Leda shook and sobbed. "You were but a demon, a vile demon after all," she blurted. Then she stood leaning upon the shining portion of the longsword as if surveying her handiwork but her eyes were unseeing.

Gellor had not been idle meanwhile. The troubador had rushed to Gord's side and defended his comrade from the press of huge demons who would have thrown themselves upon the small man and torn him to shreds. The

work was hot at first, as the initial press came for them. Gellor's blade rang against strange armors and stranger weapons as he dueled with one after another of the creatures. Oddly, it was an ancient and clumsy thing, a hook-bladed khopesh, that nearly did for him. The demon wielding it was Lord Apepi.

"Hew harr mine!" the cobra-headed thing had hissed as the khopesh tore Gellor's sword from his grip and sent it tumbling away.

"Only if you can fight better than you talk" the troubador had rejoined, pulling free his dagger as he did so and taking a defensive stance. The demon was the last facing him, and Gellor silently thanked all the deities who assisted fools as he crouched before the unwavering stare of Apepi. Poison spittle and fangs as well as sword threatened him. The dag he held was useless except to parry attacks, and even that had to be done with utmost care, or the massive weight of the khopesh would snap the weapon or toss it away. Gellor tried to move crabwlse toward where his sword lay.

"Phaat!" Apepi expelled a gob of venom between the one-eyed baid and his weapon. "No, maan. Thaat whill sspoll my enjoymenss," the cobra mouth articulated in its hissing, clumsy parody of speech.

The predicament his comrade faced was evident to Gord. The young champion had laid about him with the twin relics as the wave of enraged demonlords had swept upon him. As if acting of their own volition, the melded Theorparts had shifted form. First as a massive bardiche they had gone, cutting and hewing away the whole front rank of the attackers. Back the thing had come, now a many-spiked morning star from whose iron head shot daggers of crackling energy. Then it was a staff Gord clutched, and out of that black length had poured forth a stream of even blacker lances of force that pierced many a demonlord and ended all existence then and there. After that initial onslaught, Gord had been forced to fight a series of indIvidual combats against the few great demons who still remained. Then the last one's will had broken, and Gord was at last able to come to Gellor's aid.

"Whaat?" the snake-headed Apepi hissed angrily as Gord interposed himself. "No fairnesss in thisss fight?"

"Of course," Gord almost laughed in reply as he snapped his wrist. The length of the two Theorparts, now a steely whip, wrapped around the heavy

khopesh. "I fairly despise you, and I fairly finish it so!" He tugged, and the hook-topped sword flew from the demon prince's grasp. "Now you may pick it up and fight again with my comrade, who is now getting his own weapon — or you can run!"

Both men laughed as the cobra-demon fled from the field by means of its own inner powers, a force that recalled the demon safely to his own stronghold elsewhere in the Abyss. "And now?" asked the troubador, surveying the littered field.

"We get Leda and the Unbinder, and be away from this pestilential place," Gord said.

"A plan worthy of Balance's finest, Gord," Gellor agreed. "Yonder Graz'zt is attempting to rally the disheartened horde he marshalled here, and his consort is urging compliance with the Eye of Deception."

"There could be more slaughter, but that would avail us nothing. Our goal is Tharizdun, and that goal is at hand."

The statement sobered Gellor. "Yes. ... I had almost forgotten that Let's get on with it, then."

The two tired men moved quickly despite their fatigue. "Good work Leda! I see you have managed your share of the enemy, too," Gellor said to the silent girl.

"Never mind that." Gord reprimanded, seeing that Leda was in near shock from what she had had to do. He took the sword gently, sheathing it, then placed his arm around her protectively, as a father might comfort a child. "It has been hard, I know, dearest one. You must pull yourself together now, for unless we leave here immediately there will be yet more and ghastlier fighting to manage."

"He . . . he . . . Vuron! It was if I had to slay my own father!"

Gord steered her to a little distance away, a place where he could use the powers of the Theorparts to shift them from the nethersphere of demons to another, even worse, place. Time later to tell Leda that the albino had brought her into existence from Eclavdra for his own evil purposes. Not even one as strong as Leda could deal with so much now. "Gellor, seize Unbinder and bring it along."

"What of me?" a slow voice spoke. "Will you tarry to see if your newfound might can deal with me?"

"No," Gord said without bothering to look "You, Lord Entropy, have no part in my current plans. Seep off to where you belong." The entity was gone when the three departed the Abyss a moment later.

Chapter 14

THEY LAUGHED LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN when the vast, dark cloud that had come so suddenly deluged all beneath it with large raindrops that fell as thick as the soft grass beneath their feet. Giggling and dancing, as naked and innocent as two babes, they ran for the shelter of a broad, leafy bower formed naturally by the palms nearby. Yet no sooner had they gained the protection than the pelting ram became no more than a silvery shower, for the moving mountain of cumulus sailed onward. Then warm, golden sun streamed down.

The land is spread with a million diamonds," he said.

"And there! See the rainbow? Does it have a pot of gold at its end?"

Gord took her hand and started outward. "Of course it does! Shall we go and get it?"

"No, who needs gold? We have each other and this beautiful place."

"It isn't as lovely as you. Leda, and no golden treasure can compare to the wonders of this place." he agreed.

It was so. As the sunshine warmed the land after the little storm, a hundred bright butterflies came out to seek nectar. They soared on iridescent wings above the flower-strewn meadows as if competing for attention with the brilliant blooms. The flowers, though, seemed unaware, or perhaps merely selfassured. Their myriad hues were more akin to the pastel bands of the rainbow's arch above than the vIvid colors that the butterflies despoiled, and they overspread the land in banks and petaled clusters, punctuating the green of bent grasses and thick-trunked trees with pastel beauty.

"Vixen!" The exclamation came from Gord as Leda suddenly reached up and shook a fresh shower of drops from the bough he stood beneath. "I'll make you pay for that!"

Leda laughed merrily and ran off into the meadow, her little feet leaving a clear track where crystalline droplets were disturbed from the blades on which they perched. "You're too fat and slow!" she called, seeing that Gord was well behind her.

Without bothering to reply to the taunt, Gord sped across the sward, heady from the perfume of the thousand flowers around them and the chase too. He was neither fat nor slow. The slender dark elf was quick and athletic, but Leda was no match for Gord in a foot race. He caught her just as she came to the edge of a deep pool fringed by mosses and ferns and ringed by a dozen old trees. "Ha!" he exclaimed, catching her up from behind and raising her stillrunning feet above the sward. "Caught you rather easily for a fat old slowpoke!"

She tried to twist free, and her gyrations made them both tumble into the soft bed of vegetation there. "Oh! Now see what— " she started to admonish, thinking more of crushed ferns than any harm to the two of them.

Gord cut her short by gently turning her head and kissing her. Leda had no objection. She returned the tenderness, and soon the kiss became a long and involved caress. "Ah, my love, this is what I have so long dreamed of," he murmured as they paused in their lovemaking.

"Then dream no longer, dear one," Leda said, and resumed the embrace so that passion soon rose in both of them.

Pale and dark so intertwined and played that an observer, had there been one, could scarcely have told where one left off and the other began. There in the dimness of the grove, beside the clear water, in air redolent with sweet herbs and fragrant blossoms, Gord and Leda made love to each other for a tenth time, and it seemed as if it were the first since coming to this idyllic place. The air was warm, so that afterward they could lay back on the cushion of mossy stuff and ferns beneath them, allowing the little breezes to cool the heat that had swept their bodies. And as they lay there thus, they looked up at the tracery of deep green leaves against the pale azure of the sky and heard the whisper of wind and plash of water as a lullaby gently played for them alone. The peace of love stole upon both, and lying thus Gord and Leda fell asleep, his hand holding hers while little birds warbled somewhere nearby and insects sang a noontide drowse.

Gord awoke first. How long he had slumbered he neither knew nor cared. He didn't move or awaken Leda, content to lie still and gaze at her nude body in repose. Leda was small, perfectly proportioned, her skin as dark as the shadows beneath the ferns, hair as bright as water under the sun. Her full breasts were tipped by lavender carmine, as were her lips, although the

shade where they lay made dim the distinction between the glossy jet of her skin and those more brilliant highlights. Gord knew, though, the exact differences, for they were indelibly impressed on his mind, from the scrutiny under bright sunlight and pale moonlight too. All of her he had drunk in with his eyes as thirstily as a parched wayfarer coming upon a desert oasis, always and continuously over the brief time they had been in the place.

Her gold-flecked lilac eyes suddenly opened. "Stop staring at me so!" Leda chided. "You make me feel naked!"

"You are," Gord laughed, running his hand along her breast and belly to emphasize the point.

"No. You know what I mean!" she said crossly, but with a hint of both happiness at the attention he was paying her and satisfaction that he was thus captivated. Leda removed his hand gently, sat up, and then stood. "Come on, lazybones! The pool beckons," she cried. With a happy shout she launched herself into the air, entering the water in a shallow dive that hardly sent a ripple across the smooth surface of the pool.

As soon as her head broke from the water, Gord leaped up so as to come into the pool from high above. Leda didn't see him, so when Gord's body, curled into a ball and plummeting, came down with a terrific splash, the wave washed all over her. Down he sank into the depths, so that the light above was dim, and the waving water plants at the bottom of the deep basin caressed his body. Gord stayed there a dozen feet beneath the surface. He saw small snails at work, silvery little fish hiding from the intruder suddenly precipitated into their domain, crawfish scuttling into better cover, bivalves closed shut by the shock of his coming. A minute, then two passed thus. Gord saw Leda's form far above. She was peering down, trying to see where he was, what was happening. At Just the point he thought Leda could contain herself no longer, he gathered his legs under him, pressing his feet against the pebbly bottom of the pond. Leda dived down to find him, and Gord shot upward to meet her. His force carried them both high above the surface, Leda held fast in his arms.

"You silly lout!" she managed to sputter as they crashed back down into the water and emerged bobbing. "I thought you'd struck your head or

something. Don't ever play such a prank again," she admonished, then kissed him.

When twilight was drawing its purples across the vale, and the brilliant bands of the sunset were likewise fading into deep mauves, Gord and Leda walked hand in hand across the darkening meadow to where a warm golden glow showed beyond. "About time you two returned," Gellor admonished as a parent might scold children. "Put on something more than that, too. The night is chilly, and silk scraps are no substitute for decent garments of thick linen." They were in a cottage, a place whose walls were of woven leaves and whose roof was similarly thatched. It was lighted by little oil lamps, warmed by a fire of crackling logs when the night actually grew cool and required such. There were chairs and table of bamboolike stuff too, and plaited beds when sleep called.

"And what did you do today, my friend?" Gord asked cheerily, ignoring the frown on the troubador's face.

"Went fishing, as usual. Cleaned and cooked the catch for a pair of indolent lovebirds too, just as I did yesterday!"

"I think he grows bored with this," Gord laughed.

"Oh, Gellor, no! It's so beautiful here that I want to stay just so forever," Leda said sincerely.

That made him harrumph. "Well, be that as it may, I have no little companion with whom to while away the time as you do with such zest. Naturally I chafe and grow weary of this indolence."

"Can't you manage to do something, Gord?" Leda was serious, almost pleading. "You said that this place was one which exists only because we needed it. Gellor needs a woman now. Do find one for him!"

"Am I a procurer, then?" the young champion asked with mock indignation. "Next I will be called upon to furnish a troupe of minstrels and actors to provide a merry evening's entertainment, then perhaps a whole palace and harem!"

"Could you actually?"

Gellor didn't give Gord a chance to answer Leda. "Never mind that — any of it. I declined Gord's offer of a companion when first we entered this little paradise. Someone had to remain alert and cognizant of our mission."

"Time is of no meaning here," Leda rejoined. "The days we have tarried in this place are but seconds by Oerth's reckoning."

"Well . . ." Gord put in with some hesitance. "At first that was so, my sweet one. Now, however, as we become more and more attuned to the sphere, time does become more real. . .

"Say the whole of it," Gellor demanded.

"Our presence here," Gord admitted, "lends this place ever-growing reality. With that comes the true tick of time."

"And .. . ?" Gellor prompted.

"Each day now closes upon the same span elsewhere, Leda. Soon it will be day for day."

Gellor wasn't completely satisfied. "He means that the two weeks of subjective time we have thus far experienced now total three actual days elsewhere — on Oerth, for instance, or in the nether realms."

"Do something about it, Gord," Leda urged, a worried expression plain. "You made this place — change its clock so as not to go so fast!"

"Wait! I am neither deity nor adept theurge, love of mine! This island sanctuary was made for us — you, Gellor, me — by . . . allies. What our comrade says is all too true. Soon now we must gird ourselves again and face the final enemy."

"I'm not ready!" Leda said, stamping her small foot.

"You never did say — " Gellor started at the same time, then ceased speaking to allow Leda to finish. She blushed and turned away, not wanting to display more of her emotion, for it was both selfish and totally out of the question. She knew their responsibilities as well as the others did.

Gord simply looked at them. The bard resumed his query, allowing Leda to compose herself. "Who did spin this paradise, anyway?"

"A presence always at our elbow," Gord answered enigmatically with a measured voice. "I mean no slight, but I am pledged not to say more. Perhaps it is the shade of Basiliv the Demiurge who wrought this haven for us as his final act. ..."

"Riddles now?"

"Enough!" Gord made it clear the questioning was at an end. "Come, let's dine. Today was an active one, and I am famished!"

"Now that you say that," the pretty elven girl said with a sweet smile in Gellor's direction, "so am I. Will you serve? Or should I?"

Gellor scowled and stumped over to a chair where he sat heavily with crossed arms and stared at his two friends.

"He prepared this fine supper, so I believe we two should serve him," Gord said to Leda, trying to keep a straight face.

Leda giggled as she started to assemble the meal, and then Gord's laughter burst forth in peals. "Stop that now, dear Gord," Leda managed to command between suppressed chuckles and melodic little trills of laughter. "We mustn't be insensitive to Gellor's plight. Help me now, and after supper the three of us will discuss our leave-taking."

That night Leda, her curiosity unsatisfied, tried again to cajole Gord into telling her Just who or what had provided the sanctuary that gave them their current respite. When the three had used a magic portal to leave the desolation of the Abyss, she had supposed they would be on their way to some similarly hellish place to confront the slumbering evil of Tharizdun. Instead, they flashed from plane to plane, going through the sphere of the aether, then into astrality, up into the radiance of creative energy — and then, suddenly, onto the firm and beautiful reality of this place. "Where are we?" she had asked in wonder on seeing it. "Why came we by so circuitous a route?" the troubador had queried simultaneously.

"This haven is ours for a while, Leda my own," he had replied. "We came thus, old comrade, in order to make sure that Lord Entropy was not dogging our steps."

"How did you know about such a place?"

"I asked for it." Gord had so answered her question.

"Is it proof against intrusion? Will the entity be able to find us?"

Gord had been very certain then. "None will be able to disturb us, for the time we will spend here — not even the dreaded weight of Entropy is sufficient to break through into this realm."

So the three had welcomed the glorious garden place and tarried for long days and nights. Gellor had been asked by his young friend if there was one he would share the idyll with, but the bard had shaken his head. "I have no true love now, and no one I would care for, would become close to and want to share with. Not at this time, not with what looms before us all too soon."

Leda had quickly changed the subject, hating the reminder of duty and impending doom. Yet Gellor had pressed. "There is but a scant period available for such holiday as this. How long may this place serve?"

"Don't chivvy, Gellor," Gord had said with rebuke. "I am the one upon whom the greatest portion of the burden rests, and I am bound by duty and oath as firmly as you. There is sufficient space for us to mend mind and body both, for here the sand of the hourglass runs more slowly than old honey on a winter's night."

In truth the place had seemed timeless. Leda had used her own powers to heal herself and her two companions, for all of them had been much battered and cut in the course of their conflicts in demonium. That process was finished quickly. Their recovery of inner strength and wholeness of spirit had taken longer, and perhaps some of that damage would never be properly repaired. The matter of Vuron was immediately in Leda's mind.

It had been the albino who had created her from the deeply evil form of Eclavdra. Being twin and child both, Leda had needed nurturing, and it was Vuron who had done that. Demon or not, he had allowed Leda to become something other than a pliable imitation of Eclavdra. He had insisted she adhere to certain tenets, but at the same time allowed her freedom to form and hold other values, mores and ethical concepts, some as foreign to demonkind and evil as were love, kindness, and compassion.

But despite her memories of Vuron's superficially kind treatment of her, she ultimately agreed with Gord. He had grasped the truth, that the albino's seeming care and uncharacteristic generosity were in reality of most malign root. Vuron wished only to advance his lord and master's cause, to push Graz'zt ever upward in greatness and follow close on the ebon demonking's heels as he went. Eclavdra was destructive in her association, always seeking her own ends, ready to betray any other to further herself. Leda, as influenced by exposure to the world and in particular her intimacy with Gord, was a far better instrument for Vuron's purposes. Leda would not be

selfish and traitorous, and Vuron would always be there to remind the clone how she became a true person.

"Yet he did often speak truth," Leda had said. "He protected me!"

That could be explained easily, and Gord did so, pointing out that truth often served better than lies, that even demons could use it. Protection was likewise a matter of ensuring his own position, favor, and power too.

In all, though, the nightmare of having to kill the one who had fostered her would always be somewhere deep inside. Even if it ceased haunting her soon enough, it remained buried still.

Gord didn't speak of his own inner wounds. The dark power of the artifact ate away at him, and Courflamme was only a partial restorative in that regard, for the sword too bore malign as well as good energies within its bicolored length.

There was the attraction that had flowed between him and the demon princess Elazalag. Why? He tried to rationalize this by her similarity to Leda in color and form, albeit she was far taller. Six fingers? Who could notice that? Completely evil? Of course, but the influence of the Theorparts urged continually the total adoption of that anyway. In any case, he had never seriously considered a liaison, let alone corulershlp of an Abyssal empire. Yet the fact that the ideas had even played briefly across his mind was sufficient burden to his spirit.

The joys that filled him when the power flowed from the great relic, the exultation at slaying those enemies who dared oppose him, the leaping fires of triumph as foes fled and heads bowed. To command such force, receive homage and absolute obedience, to rule as lord over . . . what? And under whom? Under?? It was an insidious whispering always there at the back of his mind. "The great darkness has need of one who has proven able beyond all others, devil, daemon, mortal, and more. You need but accept one overlord, one master, and then as many as you wish will serve you. How many masters command you now? How many serve?"

Always the probing continued. Sometimes it was less complicated, simple and direct. "You grow weary, tired. Use the power of us to place yourself beyond all care and caring," the whisper seemed to say. "Let go your burdens, find peace and rest, join those gone before and reunite with your mother, father. Is there purpose to life? Any life at all? Soon it will end

anyway. Is there need to endure the interim? What few joys will be sacrificed, how many pains and troubles never known? Give up. Let it pass into nothingness. There is no need to deal with it all, and the unknown beyond might hold promise undreamed of. No one alone should carry so great a burden. . . ."

"IT IS WHAT MAKES ME WHAT I AM!"

Leda was startled at the sudden outburst. "What? I didn't hear what you said, my sweet," she stammered, for she too had been lost in a reverie.

"Nothing. ... I said nothing which is of import, dearest little dreamer," he responded, seeing the faraway look slowly vanishing from her amethyst eyes. "Sometimes a man has to remind himself of why he is as he is."

Partially comprehending the moment, Leda snuggled into his arms, saying, "And a woman, too, must reflect and consider. Now, man, neither you nor the woman you hold need do so."

"How's that?"

"Better things are at hand," she informed him, and placed his two hands in places that were not conducive to intellectualizing. "For you and me," Leda asserted, getting her own hold on Gord. "This is our last night in paradise. We must make it paradisaic."

Gord did his utmost to comply ....

* * *

There was a great stone thrust up like a miniature cliff not far from the little house. It was of the stuff of stars, perhaps. Certainly, it was of material unakin to anything normal to mankind — perhaps it was from the heart of some long-dead sun somewhere in the multiverse. A small shard from its face, a piece that Leda could wrap her fingers around, was so weighty that it required all of her strength to lift.

"What must the whole of this thing weigh? What could it rest on? Its mass should sink it as a lead weight in water, even were there granite below it!"

"Leda, I have no idea of the foundations below this place, nor any inkling of the material which supports this massive boulder. It is one more of the mysteries of. . . here," Gord responded.

"Hands should suffice," Gellor said laconically, going to the face of the stone outcropping. There was no visible outline, but as the bard watched, his friend stood beside him and placed his palms against the dense material. A small door appeared, swinging inward at Gord's touch.

"I'll return in a moment," the young champion said, then ducked low and went into the little passage that led inside the rock inside there was a vault.

It was a vault of the sort that might have been fashioned by primordial smiths of dwarvenkind. Thick slabs of metal, the sort that was called lodestone, formed a vast coffer with no handle, hinge or lock it too swung open at Gord's touch. Inside was a third strongbox and a fourth as well. The third was made of adamantite, its incredibly hard metal so smooth that it felt silken under his fingertips. Lastly was a long box of old silver, worked with glyphs of a sort no man had ever seen, and inlaid with sigils of orichaicum to ward against the force of the netherbeings. The whole was a repository of the Theorparts, of course. No other prize known would warrant such precautions.

The place had been there when the three came into the pocket-sized paradise. Gord hadn't been told to expect it. He had known it was there immediately, however, and had borne the two portions of the artifact straight to it and encased them inside. Now, as he lifted out first one, then the other, a heavy dread filled his chest and made his heart labor. The two fused and the one alone were separate still, each wrapped round with golden cloth bearing more of the glyphs. Those wrappings had to be undone too, for Gord felt he had to leave them here. In the heart of the strange rock.

With the single Theorpart in his left hand, the dual in his right, Gord emerged from the luminous darkness of the strange space. "I am ready to go on," he said without ceremony.

"We do look most fierce and warlike," Leda said, trying to lighten the sudden despondency that seemed to rise to overwhelm them all. "It is a fine thing, Gellor, that you chose not to dally with some bit of fluff, else never would our panoply have been so sound again."

Gellor actually smiled at that. He had reason to be proud, for the shadow armor given to them, their elfin mail, and Leda's plate mail of drow manufacture too, had suffered splitting and puncture. The great wonder-workers, the mages of Kaalvahlla, were said to have wrought many

miracles with their magic kanteels. Gellor, being a troubador, knowing the lore of bards and the sagas of skalds too, had taken the damaged stuff and set to work with his ivory harp during Gord and Leda's long absences. It had taken a little while, but eventually he had succeeded.

"Watch," he had said casually one evening. Then Gellor had taken up his kanteel and sung, playing an intricate melody as he vocalized. The links of elven smithcraft had fairly stood up and danced to that tune. They moved together, intertwined, knitted themselves into the life-protecting mesh that they had once before formed. "The dweomer worked into their metal is as whole as the mall," he had told his wondering audience when they had commented excitedly on his newfound skill. "That is the last portion not already mended. Tomorrow I shall attempt the greater complexity of Leda's black armor, and if I succeed there, the shadow plate should yield to my playing."

Perhaps Gellor's prodding for the three of them to be going on was in part based on the completion of the final challenge. His singing and strains from the kanteel as accompaniment had brought the shadowstuff into wholeness on the evening prior to yesterday. Now each of them was again fully clad in armor of the stoutest stuff, metal and magical in combination.

Gellor smiled at that, for he was justly proud. "Yes, just so," he agreed. "Fierce and warlike we are too."

"Let's not stress that too much, my friends," Gord said. He had no desire to dampen the rising spirits of the two, but felt obliged to remind them of the grimness which lay ahead. "It is to Tharizdun's donjon prison that we now trek Perhaps this stuff will be of service on the journey, but when it is time to confront the foulest of the netherspheres we had better not trust our lives to even such armor as this. One who is able to bring oppression to the multiverse is beyond such protection as the best of armors affords."

"Perhaps that is so," Leda said with a small voice.

"We shall see!" Gellor said stoutly and with ringing fortitude.

"Very well, then. The three heroes set forth to beard the greatest of devil-demons in his very den!" Gord shouted, picking up Gellor's mood.

They linked arms with a ring of metal, for even shadow armor has a faint, plangent tone that it gives forth when struck by magical metals. Then Gord

used the Theorparts another time, and the three seeking Tharizdun vanished ... or perhaps they stayed in place and the pastoral sphere vanished from around them; the effect was the same. A deep reverberation grew from the sound of their armored members striking, and that belling sound accompanied them hence.

Chapter 15

FROM THE FAINT ECHOES of a deep gong to the melodious pealing of carillons of golden bells. No, not Just golden ones — bronze and silver too lent their music to the symphony of sound. With the music came a million million bright suns and stars, and each moved in stately time to some ringing counterpart, an incredible fugue and dance. "We traverse the Celestial Sphere." Gord's thoughts were awed. Speech, even if possible, seemed somehow improper in a place such as this, and the others took his lead.

"Glad I am that our quarry is not buried in the deepest layer of the netherrealms," the bard mused. "For never have I experienced such sights and sounds as these!"

"Shooting stars!" Leda pointed to a veritable swarm of comets. They turned and came toward us. Gord .. .?"

"I am uncertain of anything here, Leda. Perhaps they simply perform their prescribed measures — or possibly ..." Gord's thoughts trailed off as he saw other sparks grow into like things, comets on blazing tails that Joined the swarm and came flashing across the velvety blackness toward where they soared.

Gellor was definite in his assessment. Those stars shoot to interpose themselves between us and our destination. Do we have the means to pass such a blockade, or must we make a hasty detour?"

"They come so quickly, Gord. We must do something now, else the choice will not be ours to make," Leda noted. "What do we three puny mortals have to oppose such incandescent might?"

Gord caused them to cease their movement through space. "We live and breathe in this airless and heatless sphere," he told his companions with assurance. "We move at will, and it is toward our final goal. I think that none can stop us, be it comet or otherwise." He watched the score or more of blazing things approach ever nearer. "Let's wait and see what force actually ventures out to greet us." The revelation of that was not long in coming.

The comets shot near, the approach made more strange by the silence. No air existed in the place, of course, so there was no means for the noise of the

things to be transmitted to the three heroes. "Why can't I hear them coming?" Leda asked. Gellor supplied the answer to that. "But we converse readily enough."

"By thought alone," Gord said. "It is by telepathy we speak."

Before there was time for further exchange, the fiery objects suddenly ceased their onrush and in a twinkling were transformed into something else. "Devas?" Gellor thought to his friends, the uncertainty clear.

"No, Man" The stern reply came from a shining titan who stood before the three in the nothingness of celestial vacuum. "We are the guardians of light. "Give us the Theorparts!"

All of the things that had approached in the form of shooting stars were now revealed. The three titanic beings could only be solars, the greatest of the servants of the empyreal planes. With each of these were four of planetary sort, and serving each planetar were seven various sorts of lesser devas. Each and every one of the beings was arrayed for battle, with armor so bright that it seared the eye to look upon it, and with a multitude of weapons ranging from bows of pure light to golden-hued swords.

"I think not," Gord replied calmly. "The relics which we bear are ours by right. You may not interfere."

"Right? Evil has no right! The very use of the term is a perversion!" the glowing being thundered.

"Yield the key immediately, or judgment will be harsh and swift."

The devas now formed a shining crescent before the three, and Leda and Gellor moved slightly so as to watch Gord's flanks. It seemed that the warrior-beings were about to attack. What could withstand these beings if they did loose their shafts of pure energy and attack with such resplendent arms? The mightiest of demons would quail before a single stellar deva, and here were sufficient numbers of the warriors of the empyreal realms to conquer the hells!

The fear was evident as it sprang into his comrade's minds. "Do not let the words of the solar being affect you so," Gord told them with confidence. "Remember the demon hordes we faced and defeated so short a time before. These guardians are not so potent." So staling, the young champion

addressed the titanic deva who had demanded the key to Tharizdun's imprisonment.

"Your zeal is misplaced, deva. We are not allies of the netherspheres. I am known as Gord. I am the foretold champion who must oppose the caged evil. These two with me, the man Gellor and the woman Leda, are likewise sworn opponents of the dark Tharizdun." Gord then awaited the being's apology and perhaps assistance, for his explanation was clear, concise, and truthful. He was disappointed.

"All who are not of like mind are adversarial to me," bellowed a solar whose radiant hue was of golden topaz, from his position to the left of the three wayfarers.

From opposite that being, one of pearly glow boomed, "No writ not of our making is valid, mortal Give over the Theorparts!"

The solar whose brightness shown as sapphire and who stood squarely before Gord also objected. "You serve only Evil in what you do! You may not pass!"

"You cannot bar our path," Gord said without heat. "You prate of 'right' and 'Evil' and suggest that only the ethos you pronounce is noble. Where were you and your fellows when we fought and bested daemons and the lords of the Abyss? Now, because of your narrow concepts, you demand what is not yours to ask Should I choose to give over the key — and I do not — then you would but postpone the inevitable. Then there would be none left to oppose Tharizdun. One champion alone is prophesied to stand before Evil when it arises in all its strength. I have shouldered my burden, accepted the responsibility, and will continue to do so. I exist to oppose the Darkest One, and until he is risen, I am unfulfilled in purpose!"

Pausing, Gord swept his arm to include the whole of the assembled beings of Light "You might be truly good and Just, you devas, but not one of you, not you all together, can successfully confront and defeat Tharizdun. I am unsure whether even I have any chance of winning, in truth, but it is written that I am the one who might do so. I must, then, retain the key and free the great Evil now. It is foreordained."

"We of light forged the prison, wove the barries, laid the slumber upon the ultimate woe," the central of the three solar devas proclaimed.

"It is so," intoned the others as if speaking to themselves.

"The three parts of the key were also made in the Celestial Realms," the titan thundered. "The Theorparts are ours by right!"

"Not if I choose to retain them. I do so. The multiverse demanded a balance when you chained Tharizdun, and the key's portions were sown for any to discover, as was decreed. Now I have all three. We will pass."

At those words the Guardians of Light drew back to a greater distance, and the solars and planetary devas conferred as the lesser ones looked on. "YOU gainsay our demand?" queried the one of amber radiance.

Gord nudged Gellor. "We do," the troubador responded firmly.

"You defy the requirement of Good?" the pearlescent titan asked, righteous indignation plain in his great voice.

"We define 'Good' differently, and do reject your words," Leda affirmed without prompting from Gord.

Perhaps she had read deep in his subconscious.

"The unending enmtiy of the realms of light — such prospect dissuades you not from the folly of resistance?" This stentorian-voiced question rolled from the azure-hued solar who had first confronted the three. "It is all the cosmos which must suffer your evil!"

"As you yourself stated, those who do not assist, hinder. Should we then pay heed to threats of enmity? Active opposition? You speak of folly, but the Empyreal Realm now basks in that very stuff, as you and your pack of stooges evidence," Gord said angrily. "You have narrow interpretations and misplaced values in this regard. Save for our action, you and all of the beings of Light would now be facing Tharizdun and his swarming hordes of netherlings, risen here to destroy you, the higher spheres, and impose Evil everywhere.

"You prate of cosmic consequences, but in all the multiverse there is but one appointed to the duty of opposing the scion of darkness. You know I am that one, yet you care more for your own concepts than for the ultimate fate of the cosmos you pretend to defend. Narrow, distorted, and mistaken. All truth does not rest with you.

"We have but one course now, and we will carry through with it. Away with you, all of you!" As he said the last words Gord drew forth the two portions of the relic, holding them upright before him, so that they were plainly visible as badges of his intent. Then he willed himself and his two comrades ahead, directly toward the devas.

At that the full population of the beings manifested itself. Elemental devas, aethereal and astral too there were, totalling eighty-four ready to serve the celestial beings, the planetary devas. Those twelve great beings, in turn, stood ready to fulfill the bidding of the three empyreal devas. those of solarian form.

But if the first were large, the next gigantic, and the stellar devas of titan size, the one which materialized to bring the assemblage to its full one hundred was so awesome as to defy description. The nine and ninety others bowed as the greatest of them appeared directly before the three humans.

"There is no evil in tour purpose," it said simply. "I will guide you to your destination."

"But.. ." Gord managed to stammer.

The archdeva was suddenly diminished, transforming itself to a size that was commensurate with the stature of the folk who floated there in the airless plane. "these others were but one last test — the final one prior to that which is to come. I regret the necessity, gord the champion. this too was prescribed, beyond my authority to alter. know now that your trials in the netherworld were sufficient opposition. No physical resistance is posed here."

"The threat was made," Gellor suggested.

"In truth," the being agreed, "we did make the test real. conviction and courage both were tried here, and neither was found lacking in you three. That is finished. The time to move onward is now. Follow."

With the celestial warriors escorting them, Gord, Leda, and the bard traveled onward through the near infinity of the Celestial Sphere. At last they exited that glorious realm, passing onward into another that was even more incredible.

"We have moved higher," the archdeva informed the three when they paused in awe. "We now enter the exalted place of pure color and fire, the

Empyreal Sphere. Because I am of this plane, our passage will be swift."

"And then?" Gord managed to inquire.

"We shall see," the archdeva said. "what is beyond here is for you to assess and cope with as you may. MY abiltiy to assist ends with the culmination of the passage here."

Eventually the three and their majestic escort of devas traversed the wondrous place of light, and flame and hue gave way to growing colorlessness. In the distance grew a wall of pale stuff that appeared as would cliffs to wayfarers trekking across a vast plain. Still the entourage pressed on, and their way took them up something like a road that wound through great mountains. The onyxlike strata of milky white and glowing gray that composed the mountainous formation through which they traveled grew paler still as they went, until finally it was almost colorless where the path topped the range at a place like a mountain pass.

"This is the border of the empyreal sphere. Yon beyond is the place you seek. fare well!" Gord turned to say something to the great deva, but it and all the rest were gone.

"At least we were given swift and safe passage," he said with some small degree of confusion.

"The upper realms are an enigma, to my way of thinking." Leda said with a frown. "First we are made to feel as if we were malign and in peril, then those same beings serve as a noble train to see to our welfare, and then they vanish! Compared with these, even the workings of demons are more straightforward and understandable!"

"Be thankful we didn't have to oppose the devas," Gellor told her. "I am confident that we could have forced them to abandon their opposition, but we would have paid dearly to defeat such as them."

"What place is this, anyway?" Leda inquired practically. "The guide never told us."

The roadway went on before them, twisting and turning upward after crossing a ridgelike spine whose sheer sides disappeared into a misty chasm, so that the pathway crossed the chasm as a bridge spans a vast river. "I can make out something there amidst the clouds," Gord offered, pointing outward to where the road led.

"It looks to be a castle of pearl!" Leda was excited by the beauty she beheld. "See? Its walls seem to grow from the very mountain, and its spires are thrust into the clouds above!"

The analogy was in very mundane terms, but it was apt There was no other way to describe the fortress. It seemed the epitome of the faiiy castle. In fact it was apparently a structure of ivory and pearl, silver and opal too. Smooth wall and soaring buttress, thick tower and high turret top, all were of white and delicate appearance. "It is passing strange that the greatest evil ever known is therein," Gord commented. "Let's see this castle firsthand."

It required actual walking to gain their destination. No power other than their own legs could carry them there, though all three attempted arcane means and magic. When such attempts proved to be of no avail, the three proceeded afoot, and after a strenuous climb came to the gatehouse of the snowy fortress. The latter was apt also, for it was chill, and there was ice over all. Everywhere they looked they saw silver and gold. The castle was beautiful, preciously adorned — and frozen. The path ended at the outwork. No road crossed from the gatehouse to the great fortress itself. Between the two was a mist-filled space at least fifty paces across.

"The gates of this outpost and those of the castle proper stand wide. What means that?"

"I couldn't say for certain, Gellor, except to think aloud. Not many could have come to this locale, so perhaps the gates are but decoration."

Leda shook her head. "I think that what we see is outside reality as we define it. I submit that we see here a great castle because that is the way our minds interpret the place. We are bound to enter, so there are no gates barring our entry, no portcullis."

"Nobody said the way would be easy," Gellor laughed. "This is your hypothesis, so let's move to the sticking point. Where is the bridge to span the gap?"

"Old jester," Leda said with feigned irritation. "I am not the sage of this group. You have frost there on your thatch. Give us your wisdom!"

The exchange was certainly one last attempt to relieve the anxiety of what faced all three, but Gord was no longer in a frame of mind to deal with things thus. "Leave off, Leda and Gellor. No more flippancy. Give me

silence! Don't you realize what lies before me? What I must do?" He stared at his comrades, and they looked away. Gord was abashed. "Forgive me — that was uncalled for. My entire being is full of dread, so if I am short of good humor, and sharp-tongued, please understand."

"Of course," his friends said in unison. Both were as much on edge as he was, and the desire to somehow make the way easier had brought on the mock levity. "I am with you to the end," Gellor said. "No word you utter now offends or hinders our comradeship." Leda did not need to say anything, for the bond between her and Gord was sufficient.

"I think I understand. . . ." The young champion was staring into space, his fingers idly playing over the twisted surface of Unbinder. "It is that no creature was ever meant to come here, let alone enter. Don't you see? If ever the three fractions of the relic were united, made into one whole, then the imprisoned one would be set free. Perhaps Tharizdun would have no need of a bridge, or possibly there is a way from inside to cause one to appear. No matter. The Theorparts provide our means of access."

"How so?"

"Here, Leda. Take the sword, for Courflamme will interfere with the work. And Gellor, seeing as you asked how. I think you should have charge of Unbinder's weight in this process. I need to be unencumbered when I attempt the separation of the remainder."

"How can that be done?" Leda sounded uncertain. "Are not all three meant to fuse into a single key?"

"Only elsewhere. Here. I think, each is an entity unto itself again." She had the scabbard belted around her tiny waist by then, and Gellor had taken the malign shape that was known as Unbinder firmly in his hands, so Gord was free to make his attempt. "Watch . . . and wish me success."

Concentrating on the space before them, the young champion called upon Initiator, first of the keys, to manifest itself. The metal shape he held forth as he did so suddenly shimmered and fractured, becoming two distinct parts again. Gord caught Awakener in his left hand even as the other Theorpart suddenly sprang free from his right. It shot like an arrow, straight across the chasm, but it grew longer and broader as it went. Then it was across, and with a resounding bang fused to become an arching bridge of quicksilver.

"Well, if one can trust such mercurial stuff, we can now proceed to the castle," Gord drawled.

"I have no relic to hazard," Leda volunteered. "I shall lead." Before there was time to object, the dainty elf put her feet upon the span. "This stuff feels uncertain underfoot, and the going is heavy, but I find it otherwise unremarkable," Leda called after a dozen steps. "As soon as I near the end, let Gellor follow."

Gord wanted to reprimand her presumption, scold Leda for risking herself in the first place, but he kept his mouth shut. After all, the three of them were committed to this undertaking, and until the end it made no difference which of them served as leader. Then again, it seemed that she was acting with inspired correctness. He was not the only one who had insights. As the sword was formed of dark and light to achieve Balance, it seemed that Leda and he were almost a whole in this venture, with Gellor as the stuff that held them together in crisis. Then he stopped his musings, for Leda had arrived at the gateway into the great fortress, and the bard was beginning his passage over the strange bridge. Gord noticed that it seemed to shift and give a little at his comrade's steady tread, but run it did not. Quicksilver apparently, but not quicksilver.

"Your turn, Gord," Leda called as Gellor reached her side. "Hurry!"

Without answering, he stepped onto the span and walked along its arching incline. The surface yielded slightly to his foot, but it seemed solid otherwise. At the apex of the arch, something caught his eye. There was a silvery glint of another nature there, something small lying atop the mercurial bridge. Gord paused, bent, and studied the thing. It was a silver-hued ring set with a perfect diamond. Hesitating only an instant, Gord picked up the ring and went on to join his friends.

"Shall we explore inside?"

"Not easily, Gord. This passage is filled floor to celling with ice as clear as air — but hard as diamond!" Gellor rapped his Theorpart against the stuff to demonstrate his observation. The ice, if ice it truly was, gave off a crystalline ringing from the blow.

"What have you found?" Leda asked, having noticed him pick something up on the bridge.

"Here," Gord said distractedly, handing the small elven girl the ring. "You care for it. This blockage is another of the tests, I suppose, Gellor. Let us see what the second of the fractions can do, ah? It would be natural for Vitalizer to dismiss this life-stopping ice."

"You mean Awakener?"

"Call it what you will. There is no true appellation for any of these things, save what we have surmised is needed to release the captive. What do you suppose will occur when we reach the cell wherein Tharizdun lies? No need then for these things, I wager!"

"I wasn't contradicting — "

"Let it be," Leda said to the bard. "Our hero will have his own way, else he will lash us with his tongue till we name him nuncle."

"Now you cease, girl," Gellor chided. "We are all as ill-tempered as badgers. What happens, comrade, if you opt for the wrong key, as it were?"

"I don't think any of us would survive to find out."

"Why not Unbinder, then? Aren't these ways ice bound?"

"A worthy reasoning, Gellor." Gord paused. "Hmmm. Now you make me unsure. . . ."

Leda suggested that he hold fast to each to see if there was a clue hidden within the Theorparts. Gord agreed, but neither portion of the relic felt right or wrong. He had her touch them, but there was no better result. "Now, Gellor, you tiy," urged the dark elf.

As if on a whim, the troubador touched both simultaneously. He froze in the act, as immobile as if he himself had become ice. It lasted only for an instant however. Releasing his hands, Gellor spoke in a sweet, clear voice that was unquestionably not his own. "He was right to counsel you to caution, champion. It is the portion you name Unbinder which must free this place of its choking ice."

Gord stared first at Gellor. His expression was blank Then he looked questionlngly at Leda. "Dare we listen? That must be . . can be none other than . ."

"Tharizdun," Gellor supplied, speaking again in his own gruff voice.

"And? Tell us, bard, was the intrusion meant to deceive?"

"Leda, I am unable to say," he replied, looking from her worried face to Gord's own. "Yet there seemed no malice or cunning. I was aware of another there in my mind — just for the instant it took to relay the advice you heard. Then the presence was gone!"

Gord took the relic from where it rested on the pale marble of the threshold. "I will rely upon my instincts in this matter, then." It was Unbinder's peculiar shape he used, not that of Awakener. "Come, ancient artifact of imprisoning, loose the icy mirror which blockades these halls and rooms!"

"The thing glows red!" Gellor exclaimed. Indeed, the Theorpart in his friend's hand was fiery scarlet at its tip and the heat palpable from a distance. It wasn't burning Gord's hand, but as the bard watched, the wielder thrust that incandescent tip into the ice. There was a chiming when that contact was made, rather than the hiss of heat battling with water. Then the relic sped ahead of its own volition, growing hollow, becoming no more than a cylinder of growing dimension as it went.

"The ice has vanished," Gord said needlessly, for he had already stepped into the castle's entry hall.

"There is no more piercing chill, either," Leda noted.

Just then there was a faint tinkling sound, the noise metal makes when it touches lightly on stone. Gellor's boot had kicked something that rolled with a wobbling motion as it went. He took several quick steps, reached for the thing, and scooped it up. "It is a gold ring set with jacinth," he exclaimed. "Which of us dropped it?"

None had, of course. "It is as with the little band of silver I gave to Leda," Gord observed. "With the appearance of that one, old friend, I surmise the ring comes from the disappearance of the Theorpart."

"But I put the ring you handed to me on my finger," Leda said. "I felt I had to . . . "

He didn't comment, but instead Gord looked at the grizzled veteran. "Is there a desire in you to don that ornament, Gellor?"

"Yes," the troubador said after a moment to consider it. He was holding the golden ring in his closed fist, allowing any power in it to flow into him

thus. "There is something which urges I place it securely upon my hand — now!"

"Do so," Gord said after pausing a moment himself to consider, just as Gellor had reflected when asked about the thing.

"Why, Gord? What if"

"Never mind finishing that query. I think I know both question and answer. I'll tell you both later, though, Leda. Now it is needful for us to press ahead with alacrity." He began to suit word to action, moving into the luminous interior of the fortress, looking here and there as he went. The little elven girl and the bard followed readily enough, Gellor a step to the rear because he had taken a moment to slip off his mailed gauntlet and place the gold ring with its tawny orange stone upon his finger.

It was as if the place were a true castle. There was a great hall and antechambers, cellars and a dungeon beneath, galleries and countless rooms above the ground floor. The whole was furnished as would have been a like place on Oerth, save all things were fashioned of white material, or nearly white, or crystal. Ivory and various sorts of pale stone were common, and there was silver and platinum in profusion. Tables, chairs, and rugs too. All as new, none showing the slightest hint of ever having been used.

"No one has dwelled in this stronghold, not ever," Leda commented. "Where is the one we seek then?"

"He is here, right enough. We must keep searching," Gord said. "Split up. This castle has many towers. He must be in one of them."

Eventually the truth was plain. The great middle tower, the highest of the whole structure, with its turreted, gold-roofed tip thrust two hundred feet into the clouds, was the last place that remained unexplored by them. The three proceeded up its spiraling stairs together, feeling small and impossibly weak to accomplish the task that awaited, but determined nevertheless to try.

"What metal is this?" Gellor asked, for they had come to a door made of metallic stuff as blue as a summer's sky.

"None I have ever seen or heard tell of," Leda said, touching the stuff as she spoke.

"It is adamantite, pure and unalloyed with any other metal," Gord informed his companions. "Once, long ago when I practiced my thievish skills in Greyhawk I came upon a half-dozen small ingots of it. Because of their beauty and weight I took them. I exchanged those little bars of adamantite for their weight in gold orbs, my friends," he said ruefully. "Only afterward did I learn that not even platinum was sufficient. Adamantite of such purity is five times more precious than rare orichaicum!"

"A whole massive door of the metal! This is not possible," the bard murmured.

"Anything is possible here. The greatest of the Empyreal Spheres built this prison, didn't they?"

"Right. Leda. One tends to forget because it is so much like a place on our own world."

"We see it thus," Gord reminded. "Phantasm or not, this adamantite is real enough. This is where the last of the Theorparts needs be employed. Come now, you useless piece of junk" he said as he readied Awakener. "We wish to see if you can handle the hardest and most magical of metals."

As if guided by sure knowledge, Gord pressed the blunt end of the strange piece of metal to the adamantite slab that sealed the way before them. The Theorpart ran, appearing as if it were molten and alive. Part formed a handle, and from the plate of it ran bands that merged where hinge bolts would be. The whole transition took but a minute. As the last of the relic transformed into the means of opening the adamantite portal, there was now the familiar tinkling of metal upon stone. "Another ring," Gellor said, pointing.

Leda picked it up, a circle of the azure that was pure adamantite. "Look, Gord. Somehow the stuff has been wrought to allow the setting of a great sapphire!"

"Each now has a ring — you must don that one, Gord."

"Gellor is right, love," Leda urged as the young man seemed to hesitate. "These bands offer us some protection, I think"

"Very well," Gord agreed, and took a moment to put the ring on his left forefinger. It fitted perfectly there. "Now I must don my sword again too,"

he said to Leda. "Slip the poniard from the belt and keep it for a weapon, for I have no need of it, and you are weaponless — at least as far as such arms are concerned."

"This is the dag which severs metals," Leda said with reservation in her voice. "You give me too precious a thing."

"Nothing is too valuable where you are concerned, Leda; you are more to me than any possession, even Courflamme. I must wield the sword, for it is the prescribed weapon of the champion who stands for Balance. Whether my sword, Gellor's, or the dagger I give to you here will avail us aught is moot. Better to have something, though, than to lose for want of so little a thing as that."

"Very well," the girl said, glancing lovingly at him as she attached the dagger to her girdle. It was almost as long as a shortsword, though not quite so broad-bladed or heavy. "I know how to use this," Leda added, giving it a pat.

"And my sword is ready to stand beside Courflamme," Gellor avowed. "Shall I open yon door?"

"No. It is for me alone to do. I enter first, and you two follow." Gord turned to the door and raised his voice. "By this act I hereby free Tharizdun from his eons-long imprisonment!"

The two watched as their comrade stepped up, laid his hand upon the metal of the Theorpart that now formed the great door's latch, and pushed down and inward. The slab of adamantite swung silently inward.

Chapter 16

"BRAVE RESCUERS, NOBLE WARRIORS! Thank you! Welcome!" The cry was filled with joy, and it sprang from the smiling lips of a young boy. The boy was fair-haired, with a pale complexion matching the hue of the marble, only now his cheeks were flushed apple-bright with happiness, and his blue eyes sparkled with joy. "Have I been locked in this tower long? It seems forever — a month at least."

Gord actually recoiled from the boy's appearance. "Stand fast!" he ordered abruptly as the lad started to come toward the three where they stood just inside the big, circular chamber. The golden-haired youth stopped still, looking less frightened at the threatening swordpoint than puzzled at such treatment.

"Have you come to slay me, then? I thought you saviors. . . ."

"Who are you, boy?"

"Boy? I am no boy!" the youngster said with surprising dignity and weight of authority in his voice. "I am Tharizdun, the Emperor of All — at least," he went on less forcefully, "I am meant to be someday when I become grown,".

"Gellor?" Gord said meaningfully.

"I see only the lad," the troubador said, but he sounded uncertain.

"I find neither lies nor deep evil here," Leda volunteered. She too was using her own powers to determine if they were being deluded by magic.

Gord looked carefully at the prisoner and the place he had been held fast. The tower room was about forty feet across and furnished as would be a lord's solar or office, perhaps. There was a couch, table and chairs, a small shelf of bound books, a few decorative things, and both candle prickets and dweomered lamps for illumination. The blue of adamantite lined the walls, he noted, unseamed and smooth. The metal barred the three windows that pierced the wall, and some bluish crystalline stuff closed the spaces between the thick adamantite bars. The upholstery, rugs, and tapestries were all finely made and costly, though not so exceptional as some examples Gord had seen. Even the boys apparel was thus, rich but not unique. "Who are your parents, then?" Gord asked sharply.

"I have neither father or mother — at least, none I know of." the lad said slowly, as if hating to admit that.

Gellor stepped nearer to the small boy, peering down at him quizzically. "But you are Tharizdun? You are ruler of the cosmos?"

"I am Tharizdun." the youth averred, "and Emperor To Be of all the multiverse."

"What is the multiverse?" Leda asked him suddenly.

"It's . . . I . . . well. . . just everything! This castle, the mountains around, even the sky, I suppose. . . ."

"Come on, then, Emperor Tharizdun," Gord ordered, pointing to the curving flight of steps that led to a higher room of the tower. "Show us the remainder of your apartment."

"It is a prison," the lad contradicted crossly. "And where did you get my ring?" he said in an imperious tone, pointing at Gord's outstretched hand with the adamantite circlet on his index finger showing plainly.

"Never mind that now, boy," Gord snapped. He was very uneasy and not sure how to proceed. He was the champion, the one to fight a duel to the death with the ultimate Evil one, Tharizdun. But he could slay this boy with a single cut of Courflamme. Something was wrong, deadly wrong. "Lead us above."

Frowning, feet shuffling noticeably, the imperial youngster did as he was told. The chamber above was furnished as a dining salon with banners, armor, and ancient-looking weapons used as decorations. The whole of it, celling, walls, floor, was also sheathed in the azure of purest adamantite. Gord paused to tap the panes that closed the windows here as below. The clear crystal was adamantite dweomered to be transparent!

Leda, meanwhile, stepped up to the small boy and took his face between her hands, the obsidian of her skin sharply contrasting with the whiteness of Tharizdun's pallor. "Who attends you here? How do you receive food, drink fresh clothing?"

The lad looked at her with evident puzzlement. "Attends? No one has been here for a long, long time. I had servants of all kinds — even knights and councilmen with long beards. Then ugly and horrid things came. Everyone who served me was killed or ran away. I tried to hide from the

beasts, but they caught me. I was carried up to this place and thrown inside."

"And food? wine?"

"Look" the lad calling himself Tharizdun said with a smile as he pulled free from Leda and ran to the long, narrow table. There he snatched up a ewer, proceeding to fill a half-dozen large goblets of crystal that stood next to the container. First golden liquid flowed into the goblets, then deep ruby wine, and finally clear water. "It pours whatever I think of, and when I am tired of a vessel being full, the contents simply go away." From there he went to a golden bowl filled with exotic fruits. "When I take any of these old things away, another just like it appears — langon, nollip, dewfruit. naberries, plums — it doesn't matter. The loaves of bread are always fresh and whole on the morning for my breakfasting, cream and butter here," he told Leda as he moved around the board, "salt and porridge and all manner of other stuff I am tired of seeing!"

"I see," Gord intoned as he watched the youth. "Now lead us higher, please."

"Very well," the boy said with a smile that was warm and friendly again. Then a slight frown creased his brow. "I don't like being ordered about, you know. When I am Emperor nobody will do that, but I suppose until then you can. After all, you three are nobles, and the most favored in all my realm, because you have saved me. Come on!" Tharizdun ran up the stairs with boyish vigor and glee. "My bedchamber and playthings are above!"

It was Just as the lad claimed. The room above was slightly smaller than the one below, but it too was sheathed in the pale blue metal. A royal-looking bed, armoire, chest of drawers, and shelves were there. Two large chests and several smaller ones too helped to make the chamber a clutter. Toys were lying about — a wooden sword and shield, figures of soldiers and mounted knights, and a score of other things that a young prince might have to play with. The bed was neatly made, however, and there were no garments strewn about. "Who is your valet?" Gellor queried, knowing it was impossible for a boy alone to be so neat.

"That bed and my clothes are like everything except my toys," the lad said, dismissing the subject.

"Meaning?" Gord pressed.

"The linens on the bed are always fresh and smooth, and it makes itself immediately when I climb out of it. I jump in and out again sometimes when I'm bored, Just to see it happen. Each day when I get out of bed there is a big basin of water for me to climb in and bathe. If I don't do that, then there's no food downstairs," Tharizdun added, evidently recalling a rebellious failure. "There's always a change of underlinen too, and fresh robes and hose, and all that". He brightened. "What would you like to play? I have games which I'm sure grownups play — quoits, even chess!" There was eagerness filling his voice, and he began rooting through his belongings in search of the games.

"Perhaps later." Gord said. "What lies above? I see a ladder and trapdoor there."

"Oh, that is my observatory. From there I can see all the lands around. I don't like it there, though, for it is boring."

"Go up the ladder, boy," Gord instructed. "We will all observe what's to be seen up there." Tharizdun actually scowled at the command, but he put aside the things he was pulling forth and clambered up the bronze rungs of the ladder. Above was a conicalroofed space, the top of the turret. It was covered all over with the same adamantite armoring, and where there were spaces between the merlons of the thick battlement, the clear metal formed a barrier. "There is little to see, actually," Gord noted, looking at the lad.

"Just the mountains all around, the road, mists everchanging below, clouds in a million forms above." He sat down with dejection on the low step of the dais-like disc that filled the center of the place as if to provide a circling bench for all who would come to the place to look out. "At least your coming has made this place a little warmer!"

"It certainly is very cold up here," Leda said with a little shiver. "Can we go back below?"

"Yes, Gord," Gellor agreed. "Leda is right. It's too chill and damp here for us or the boy. Let's consider what's to be done where it's warmer."

A touch made Gord withdraw his hand from the stone seat. "This still sends forth waves of cold as the ice did. The mass of stone here must have absorbed the chill and not yet warmed as the remainder of the castle seems to have done. Very well, we can climb back down now. There is nothing further to see."

Gellor and Leda went back down the ladder, then Gord sent the boy scrambling below. He came last, closing the trapdoor to keep out the bitter air from the observatory above. The lad had wasted no time, and Tharizdun was again rummaging around in his great boxes, tossing out things to amuse his guests and himself. "Here's the chessboard — the pieces are in that box under my bed! Let's play for a wager."

"And what stakes do you think appropriate?" the bard asked casually.

The boy drew out a large metal casket as well as the smaller box that he had indicated as the receptacle of his chess pieces. "I have lots of these stones," Tharizdun said as he flipped the coffer lid up. "I'll stake all the ones of blue color against your ring," he said, heaping a handful of moonstones and bluewhite opals into a small mound as he pointed to Gord. "Or else I can play with these amber-colored ones against his," Tharizdun said as he pointed at Gellor, "or else the pearls for the dark lady's ring."

"I thought you said that the ring I wear belonged to you already?" Gord queried softly.

"Of course. Didn't you understand? I am to be Emperor of everything, so everything is mine. I don't want to be mean, though. That is base. Nobles can have things, and if I want them, the nobles have to give them to me as gifts of their own free will, or else I can win them."

"Who told you that?" Leda asked.

"All you three do is ask questions! Let's play a game or two, and then I think I'll want to leave here."

Leda turned and headed down to the chamber below. "You two play against the boy if you like," she called over her shoulder as she went. "I am hungry and thirsty. Can I bring you some food when I come back? Or will you join me?"

The boy scowled, but neither Gord nor Gellor was inclined to follow. "Have a care with the stuff, girl," the troubador advised. "It might . . . you know!"

"I am not so naive as not to test for toxins, Gellor,"

Leda said as she disappeared. "I'll be back . . . ." and her voice trailed off as she moved out of earshot.

"All right, sonny boy." Gellor said as he turned from the stairs to where Tharizdun selfproclaimed stood awaiting. "I will play at chess with you."

The ring you have for these few gems?" the youth asked, pointing at the heap of fifty or sixty large amber and tiger's-eye stones he had mounded to one side.

Before the bard could respond to that, Gord stepped forward and stood between his comrade and the boy. "Wait a moment, please. On your own word, lad, I was given the challenge to play first. Before you can test the bard's skill at the game, you must defeat me."

"Oh, yes," the lad said, brightening at the prospect of an eager opponent "You first, sir rescuer, then the man with the funny eye. Perhaps by then the night lady will wish to have a game, too."

"I am Gord, he is Gellor, and the lady with ebon complexion is Leda. Now, what is the wager again?"

The blue ring you have, sir, against all of my azure stones."

"Let us begin," Gord affirmed, reaching for pieces to place on the board. "I enjoy this pastime." The game was similar to the dragonchess form that the young champion had first played against the Catlord. Twelve squares across, eight deep, with a lower board that the boy pronounced the netherboard, and an upper one he called the astral, to make three fields in all. Spirals stood as posts at the four corners, and each was also a checkered path that wound from the lowest board to the middle and on up to the highest. There were four steps to each successive plane.

"What of these?" Gord inquired. "Can any man use such a means to ascend or descend?"

"You may move first, Sir Gord, so you take the pale men, I the dark" the boy said. "Only those able to go on squares of different colors can use the twisting paths as they would move normally, a single space or many squares. Vaulting and skipping pieces count all squares and move upward accordingly, and off to another board if there is distance remaining, but they must stop as soon as leaving the spiral. If an enemy man occupies the space, then it is en prise if capture is desired. The diagonal-movers use only two of the four vortices," Tharizdun went on, "because of the color of entry, of course. When these move to another field, their color changes. Dark and

light alternate above and below, though so to go from nether to astral or vice versa means there is no shifting from such transfer."

"I understand."

"Exit from a spiral requires pause."

"You mean that my oliphant could move up from the lowest to the highest, but then not continue on along rank or file?"

"That is correct," the boy said with a smile. He then tested Gord's knowledge of the pieces and their powers. They were much as those of dragonchess, but the two sides varied in name and move of forces. The youth arranged his major strength on the lowest of the three boards, twenty-four being set there. He and Gord both had but twelve pawns and pieces to array on the middle board. Gord's men alone occupied the uppermost of the fields. "Fine," the boy said eagerly as the young champion placed his last piece into starting position. "You must now move!"

Although only some of the men were allowed to jump from board to board, Gord reasoned that the steps at the corners would be important means of shifting strength to other fields as the game progressed. Pawns, dark or light, for instance, became progressively more powerful as they progressed upward or downward, and the fact that captured pieces of the enemy allowed you to create a new pawn would lead to a contest wherein the number of men did not diminish significantly as in most forms of chess. He played using this strategy, aggressively but not rashly.

It was fortunate indeed that Gord did so. The boy was an excellent player, and several times it seemed as if his traps would lead to the destruction of Gord's hard-won bridgeheads or defensive positions. Each time, though, by dint of counterthreat or trap of his own, Gord managed to avoid defeat. It was a long contest. Leda came back to watch for a time, then left again to rest. Gellor also went off for a bit to eat and to poke around, but he was more interested in the game them was the elven girl. At last, when it appeared that the dark assassin working with chevalier and devil would force the light king into the open where it would be threatened by a wave of advancing foes, Gord moved his celestial knight, a piece promoted in stature because of its attainment of the lowest board, into a place where it stood beside the commander of the black array.

"You are checkmated, I believe," Gord told the lad with a quiet voice.

"I'll take your man!" the self-proclaimed emperor said with childish anger.

"That is against the rules," Gord countered.

"Archpriest and marshal guard it."

The boy struck the board hard, and the pieces and pawns flew in all directions. "You cheated!"

"That is not true."

"I want the ring you have! Take all of those gems — I have more too! See?" he said as he rushed to bring out and display boxes from beneath his large bed. "A thousand black pearls and opals, and in this one are as many rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. You take them all! I'll give your servants as much again for the rings they wear. The gems I offer are the most perfect of jewels, and there are more here than in the whole world!"

"It is not sufficient." Gord said, motioning Gellor to stay back "I would have far more than a few baubles such as that for my ring."

"What do you ask? I am Emperor. If you want a world, two, I can command it. Name your desired price, man."

"The power of Ultimate Evil." Gord said without flinching.

"You dare ask to be me?" The boy spat that out, then recoiled with a sudden realization of his hasty words. "Only I am the ultimate of anything," he said, trying to cover his error, but even the lad knew it was useless. "Get out! Leave this place now! I command it. If you disobey, then you will be killed."

"That is also a lie, Tharizdun. I mean to stay here, and I will best you at whatever you attempt."

"No you won't, no you won't, no you won't!" The lad stamped his feet and tears sprang to his eyes as he threw the tantrum. "I'll hold my breath and explode!" The boy proceeded to do that, turning red as he puffed out his cheeks.

Leda was stunned. "This is the dreaded master of darkness?"

"He very nearly defeated Gord at that chess game," Gellor cautioned.

"So he is a genius at gaming, but that doesn't make him—"

"Please say no more, Leda, Gellor. I would send you out of this place, but I need your strength, so stay here but be silent. Keep the rings on too, for I now understand what they are and do."

Tharizdun let the air out of his cheeks with a razzing sound. "Is that so? I don't think you know half as much as you think you do, fatherless whelp of a tomcat!" The boyish sparkle in Tharizdun's eyes was now a glow of deep malice that any demon would be proud of.

"I keep my own counsel, little toad," Gord countered. "What you think and what I understand might well be at variance. Are there more games you would play at?"

"How about these?" Tharizdun shouted, and as he spoke he flung a handful of darts at Gord's face, springing to his feet as he did so.

Gord's suspicion and quick reflexes saved him. The darts were acid-filled and poison-tipped both. Blind or kill, a single one could probably do either or both. He ducked aside, and all six missed their mark Tharizdun was up and away during the distraction, however. Gellor saw him heading for the ladder and started to intervene. "Don't move!" Gord yelled. "Let him go!"

Tharizdun swarmed up the ladder, the trap door opening automatically at his approach, banging shut as his heels disappeared. "The dark disc of stone above houses his mature form," Gord informed the two who stood wondering. "Back down to the lower portion of this place, quickly!"

"Why couldn't we see his guise? Note his malice?"

"Neither you, Leda nor you, old friend, need be ashamed. His power is so immense that no normal dweomer can pierce any veil he chooses to place to hide his workings. Still, he is not omnipotent, and you two have means to counter his evil, just as the sword and ring I wear give me power to resist."

"What hope have we?" the troubador asked.

"You both have rings. The three were forged in the empyreal realms, and each bound a portion of Tharizdun's evil force into the Theorparts. The power of his nature is loosed now, but the Good which fought against it remains in our three rings." By then the three had come to the lower of the adamantitelined rooms that had been the monster's prison for so long.

"He nearly gulled me," Gellor said sadly.

"I too," Leda told the bard. "Feel not a simpleton."

"Should we go out and shut him fast again?"

"Make for the outside," Gord said. "There is no longer any means of holding Tharizdun anywhere, but I shall stand where this door once locked him in. I'll bar his passage until you two are free of his fortress."

With great reluctance, Leda and Gellor complied. In a minute they were out of sight, heading to the base of the great keep and on beyond the confines of the fortress. Gord remained motionless, waiting. Soon there was a low moaning sound that seemed to come from the very stones of the castle, and the air grew rank and heavy. Then a flush suffused the blocks of marble and pale limestone. Red streamed forth from the walls, running from high on the walls downward, dripping from ceiling overhead to spot and pool the floor. Soon the whole of the place was milky white no longer but an ugly, red-violet that darkened and grew muddy as the process continued.

With the change of hue there came the sound of a heavy tread, and Gord knew that Tharizdun himself approached for confrontation.

Chapter 17

AT LAST! How many tens of thousands of centuries had he been kept in bondage? Many. Far, far too many! While his true self had been bound in slumber, his mind drugged and powerless through the force of arcane dweomers, all that he had worked for and accomplished had been undone!

No. That wasn't exact. His puling enemies had been inept. The Lords of Light had attempted to destroy his work, but they had merely succeeded in making Evil factious — as weak as they were, those noble masters of Weal. Tharizdun smiled a smile of pure malice. Weaklings of any sort would be expunged from the cosmos soon.

The child-Tharizdun stood expectantly before him now. The boy was a creation of the Lords of Light, a place to house that part of himself that they could not submerge in their magical toils.

"Father!" the boy-Tharizdun shouted. "They escape, they escape!" he cried, fairly dancing in his excitement and fury. "Those three wear the rings!"

The true Master of Malevolence was sitting bolt upright in the stony cavity that had been his crypt for the centuries. Tharizdun was not yet fully himself.

There was a weakness evident inside, and only one answer at hand.

"Come here, my child," he said to boy. The youthful little one obeyed reluctantly, his face still a twisted mask of impotent fury. "Show me how to stop them," he commanded. That order was ignored, and a heartbeat later Tharizdun seized the child and dragged him into the sarcophagus.

"You are unnatural," the Darkest of Abominations growled as the boy started to resist. "No! I am Tharizdun! Let me—" he screamed, seeing the red lust and awful fate that the being purposed for him. His last sentence was cut short by the teeth of his unnatural sire. Long, vampiric fangs closed on the jugular of the kicking child.

"**Ahhh. That is better**," Tharizdun said with deep satisfaction as he drained the life from what had been his only consciousness for eons. Tossing aside the limp and lifeless body, Tharizdun sprang from the black crypt as lightly as a dancer. "**You dared to presume**!" the terrible being said, looking down at the pale and bloodless form that was a replica of

himself — or would have been, had Tharizdun ever been a child. "**Just because you housed a modicum of me, little jackal, that is not the same as being me! But you still have a use, for I am not yet fully satisfied**."

Then the ghastly thing grabbed up the corpse and proceeded to enjoy a cannibal feast. Tharizdun's mouth grew broad, jaws lengthened, and teeth grew to suit his desire. With snarl and slobber, he dined on flesh and bone. In but a few minutes nothing but the boy's skull remained.

Then the newly arisen emperor of the malign closed his burning eyes, seeking the ones who had freed him at last. There was no gratitude. In fact, Tharizdun would have felt none had the three been dedicated servants of his cause. All too well did Tharizdun know the prophecy of one who might resist his supreme reign over the cosmos, and just as well did the Master of Evil know that the man with gray eyes was that adversary.

"**I see you**," Tharizdun said. In his mind were pictures of the whole of the castle, the land around, even more beyond. He concentrated only on the immediate surroundings, though, for he had first to eliminate all traces of the champion and the heroes who dared accompany him. Only then would it be time to bring to bear his might and subjugate all.

"**I see you**!" and as the thought arose in Tharizdun's brain it was transmitted to the minds of the three rash humans below. "**You two will stay there at the portal**," the archfiend communicated in his chilling thought, "**and as soon as your little would-be champion has been dealt with I will come for you**." The message was meant to dishearten, frighten, and disturb his foes. Tharizdun could have attempted to accomplish all through sheer mental assaults alone, but there was something compelling him to seek out the one named Gord and master him.

"You can never rule the multiverse," came the sharp words, "Tharizdun! Not until you can best me!"

With a snap that was clear to his antagonist, Tharizdun shut his mind. The force of the challenge was much greater than the dark being had imagined it could be. The opponent was a worthy one. That was not at all to Tharizdun's liking. How could one small half-human be more powerful than any of the deities he had faced and defeated long ago? Then only a great coalition of his enemies had been successful in overthrowing Tharizdun.

"**I do not underestimate the adversary**," he said aloud softly. Arrogance and disdain were natural to the ultimate Evildoer, but now he would temper his pride and self-assurance. Testing the foe came first, discovery of patterns, weaknesses, and strengths too. Afterward, Tharizdun would strike, crush, and annihilate! He turned and stepped down, landing on the floor of the lower chamber with a dull thudding noise. Striding heavily, so that each step was like the distant thunder of doom, the Master of Malevolence went down to meet his awaiting opponent Gord was surprised when he finally saw the true Tharizdun. The being appeared as would a normal man. Tharizdun was only moderately tall, perhaps six and one-half feet. Hardly the stature of a colossal demon or devil! He was fair-complected, goldenhaired, almost beautiful in a godlike way. The boy had indeed been a true reflection of the mature evil.

"Your sudden maturation is noteworthy," Gord said easily to Tharizdun as the being came closer. Gord would dispel any notion of being made uneasy by the deliberately dread-laden tread used in coming to where Gord waited. "Years of growth in but minutes!"

Tharizdun laughed. It was so purely evil a sound that it made horripilations on the scalps of those who heard it. The dark fiend regretted that he was unable to observe its effect properly, for the small man was coifed and helmeted, sword drawn and ready. He brought his left hand from behind his back, sending something bowling along the metal-sheathed floor toward the booted feet of the champion of Balance. "**Quite mistaken, Gord**," Tharizdun said with assurance. "**These is the proof of your error**."

The thing bounced off the metal-shod toes of his boots. Hearing Tharizdun speak his name didn't bother Gord in the least. What the dark being sent rolling across the floor was another matter. It was the boy's skull, with part of its flesh still attached, so that fair hair and torn flesh competed for attention as it tumbled, and as it came it left a goiy trail of spatters. "Gods!" the young champion expostulated. "You-"

"**I did**," Tharizdun said, punctuating the pride of acknowledgment of his foulness with laugh and phantasm. There, between him and the young man who would oppose him, the Ultlmate Netherbeing recreated exactly what he had done with the boy. "**I'll have that skull back from you**," the vile creature added, "**so as to make the merging of it complete. I thought you**

would find some amusement, however, in the foretaste of your own fate, the fate of your comrades too."

The partially eaten head came wobbling around and stopped so that its empty eye sockets seemed fixed upon him. Gord was appalled, but the horror served to reinforce his determination to resist the foul archfiend to the end. "You shall not pass," Gord said with an iron-hard voice. "You are lord of nothing save this tower, maggot, unless you best me!"

"**Maggot? Very descriptive ... of yourself**!" Tharizdun said with unhurried air. "**I see you have a blade in hand which my first foes devised. how did you ever manage to reassemble it? I am amazed**," the abomination said with amusement evident in his tone. "**I quaffed its baneful dweomers and then scattered the bright, sending the sword into separate halves so that it could never again be whole**."

"What was is of no matter. It is here now, and whole, ready to send your rotten soul into an eternity from which there will be no reawakening!"

"**How very forceful! I fairly tremble at the prospect of engaging such a mighty weapon**," Tharizdun mocked, his handsome features wreathed in a vile smirk "**still, what choice have I**?"

Why, none at all when facing such a stout and puissant foe." He seemed unable to contain himself any longer. The chamber resounded to peals of his hideous loathsome laughter as Tharizdun gave vent to his derision.

Gord took the opportunity to strike, leaping in and thrusting at the being's chest, meaning to pierce Tharizdun's heart. The lunge was met in an instant by the ringing impact of a broad-headed axe. The great weapon had flashed into existence at the moment of his lunge, and Gord saw by the way Tharizdun spun the double-bitted thing that the evil being was a master with the axe. "Fast, maggot, and clever," Gord called as he withdrew quickly from the engagement. At a position Just before the entrance to Tharizdun's prison he stopped. The axe would be hampered by the lintel above the portal, by the narrowness of it too. "Come on to where I stand, then, for you must exit, mustn't you?"

It was annoying. He had thought that perhaps he could finish the contest quickly. The one whom Balance had groomed for champion was too able for such, Tharizdun reminded himself; he should have expected that. It was also irritating that the small fellow understood so well his need to get free

of the metal confines of the cell. Until Tharizdun was totally free of it, able to leech strength from the spheres of Evil, it was impossible for him to bring his total powers into play. Such a one-to-one test was not at all to Tharizdun's liking. It was a demand he could not escape.

"**You seek unfair advantage**," he called to his adversary, "**But I also have a two-part weapon**!"

That was said to distract Gord for the instant necessary for Tharizdun to alter the form of his battleaxe. The thing shimmered and dIvided. From the fission came two smaller weapons, each axe bearing but a single head, with each haft appropriately shortened as well. The relatively compressed space of the doorway would pose no great problems for such tools of slaughter. Tharizdun advanced with assurance.

Gord could not so dIvide Courflamme. The light was needed to reinforce the dark when its blade had to confront the greatest wickedness ever known. For a heartbeat he regretted giving Leda his dagger, wishing he had it to serve as main gauche against the two small axes Tharizdun now spun and played as he advanced. Realizing that advantage had been turned to disadvantage, Gord rushed, using Courflamme's length and speed to make a deadly web before him. He had to regain a position at or just inside the entry, or else the battle was lost, whether or not Tharizdun actually slew him. The sword's tip showered forth scintillations of white fire, and from that light Tharizdun drew back for an instant "We have balance again," Gord rasped, standing fast now in the portal.

"**Ah, but you again seek unfair advantage**," the malign being snarled. "**You used those coruscations of empyreal matter to bund me. but I now counter with my own forces, for you have allowed such**!"

That was true. Gord had involuntarily willed the light to ensure that he regained his blocking position. Now he regretted the increasing scope of their combat By drawing force from elsewhere, Gord had opened an opposite channel for his foe. Tharizdun would not neglect to utilize that. "You will need all the help you can summon, maggot!" Then he regretted that as well.

From the two axes streamed things resembling blind, bloated slugs. They plopped upon the unyielding floor unharmed, then crawled in masses of

disgusting, purplish-hued gropings, sucker-mouths working hungrily as they came. "**You speak to me of maggot! Now see what I bring you**."

Although not certain what one of the things would do if it found its way inside his armor, Gord was sure that agony and poison were the least of the effects. Each pass of one of the dark axes showered another score of the grubs, and a wave of the thumb-sized things would soon lap the floor at his feet. Yet he could not retreat from them, and to use Courflamme would be to invite destruction from the two whirling axes. If he used yet further force from outside this plane, then the master of wickedness could do the same, perhaps even establish a conduit that would flood Gord in its evil strength. He had to do something quickly, or else there would be no chance. It came to him in a flash of inspiration. "The ring!"

"**What did you say**?" Tharizdun demanded, hissing in hatred.

"I have the ring!" As he shouted that full into the vile creature's face, Gord thought of the blue band and its bright stone. From the sapphire came a glow, an orb of brightness that grew and solidified into a phoenix. The iridescent brightness of the creature's plumage was that of pure fire, and as would any bird, the blazing phoenix set upon the slugs. "They serve to make its hues more beautiful, no?" he called to the scowling Tharizdun, moving into an attacking stance as he spoke.

The phoenix was growing, its fire becoming incandescent as it devoured the things of Evil so quickly that Tharizdun knew there was no chance of bringing in enough for the grublike monstrosities to get past its darting beak of flame. Besides, the accursed object that Gord utilized might well send forth another of the birds if need be. He had been annoyed before, but now Tharizdun's breast was burning with rage as hot as the fiery phoenix before him. His adversary had evoked power that the dark deity could not counter, whose presence gave him no equal or greater advantage.

"**Whelp! You think me bested thus? It is idiocy**!" He turned and moved so quickly as to seem a blur. Then, from a comfortable seat on the stairway opposite the door, Tharizdun mocked, "**I must escape these chambers, it is true; but I have been in durance herein for centuries, youngling. You are mortal — or mostly so. I will wait here. you will grow weary, impatient. You will fall into sleep, or else you will come into the room to face me. either way, I can wait, for the result is foregone in its**

conclusion." The twin axes again shimmered and became one. "**The great war axe will dIvide you as it does itself**."

Part of what he heard was irrefutable, but Gord considered another tack to which his foe seemed to be oblivious. "Gellor! Leda! Use your minds to send me the force held within your rings." he urged telepathically.

Within a moment there was a surge of energy flowing into his brain, through his body. Into the sapphire ring on his hand. "Let the space here reflect the compassion in your heart, Tharizdun," Gord called out. The dark stones and dismal atmosphere indicated to the young champion that his adversary had made the fortress his own, but not so the pure metal of adamantite that caged the archfiend. That stuff was of Light, and the power of Evil could not conquer its essence.

Tharizdun heard the sounds of dripping and hissing. The noise was that of metal running molten, falling and flowing as it did so. He cast a quick glance up over his shoulder to the chamber above. It was unaffected. Then Tharizdun used his power to see into the higher places of the spire. His prison crypt was covered in glowing adamantite, stuff molten and dropping from the conical roof peak gathering and sliding toward the curved staircase. "**Mere stuff as that won't harm me**," Tharizdun laughed.

"That is so, maggot," Gord called back not moving from his defense of the only exit from the place. "It will shrink the size of your realm, though," he added, now mocking the mocker.

It was so! The metal seemed to be sentient. It pooled, gathered, then flowed down. A portion remained to seal the way to the turret's roof while the remainder oozed down toward the next opening in the floor. As it sealed that space, the adamantite from the ceiling and wall heated, ran, moved to Join the rest, ready to flow further downward soon again. It could not harm him by its furnacelike heat, nor could the metal compress or suffocate Tharizdun. All it could accomplish was to make the chamber he now rested in into a cubicle, a virtual coffin. So constricted, the small man who championed all Tharizdun would destroy could skewer the Master of Evil as if he were a trussed bullock awaiting the butcher.

He had meant to be cautious, careful, not underestimate his adversary. That resolve had been broken, because the greatest of Evil was what he was, and arrogance, cruelty, hatefulness, and vanity were integral to his

mind and makeup. Tharizdun had erred in assuming he could bypass an immediate confrontation, that he could overcome the foe easily, that he could somehow find and use his old powers. The little display with the boy's skull had been a stupid bit of braggadocio. Instead of horrifying the man to a point where Tharizdun could crush him easily, the ploy had backfired and made Gord more resolute. Now the last portion of his essence was still in the head, awaiting consumption before Tharizdun could employ his full faculties. The gray-eyed man with the deadly sword stood over the gory skull and seemed to understand its importance.

As bad was the fiasco of the three rings. The adversary obviously understood the edge those things allowed him here. If only he had eaten the child completely! Better still, had the little puppet only managed to get the tokens of Light away from the three, then served himself up to restore Tharizdun's vigor to its full! Neither case was, so what else could be done? He tried rage, but the fury was insufficient to bum away the fear. Wholly evil, totally malign, Tharizdun was all that comprises wickedness, and cowardice is as surely of that dark woe as cruelty and the rest Fear began to pervade Tharizdun, because he had no courage to face a foe who was his equal.

"**I'll hack you into bits**!" the beautifully evil one shrieked, his whole being torn by dread and hate. Tharizdun sprang erect and began to advance.

Somehow he hoped to force his way out of the confining chamber, to escape the adamantite's restraints, fly into the multiverse. Once loose, it would be only a matter of gathering power, gaining strength. Even without the immediate consumption of the last of his vital essence locked fast in the skull, Tharizdun would be so mighty that no champion could stand against him. The fear came from the evident probability of his not being able to break free without melee. The sword was too potent a weapon, and should it strike home, he. Tharizdun, might actually suffer the fate of mortals and lesser beings. The latter thought added the hate to the dread that consumed him.

For some inexplicable reason Gord moved into the chamber to meet Tharizdun's charge. Possibly it was meant to prevent a sudden lunge to freedom. Sword and battleaxe met with a clash that echoed off the metal walls, while sparks of magical generation sizzled and snapped through the air where the two weapons collided. Despite his opponent' advantages of

height, weight, and reach, Gord turned the stroke of the axe with Courflamme. The heavy, doubleheaded weapon caromed upward from the parrying blow Gord delivered. The longsword was far faster in recovery than the massive war axe. Its edge sliced along the naked flesh of Tharizdun's torso, slid rather than rebounded. "The first!" Gord exclaimed.

"**Aaagh**!" was the sound that shot from the archfiend's cruel mouth. The dweomer of Courflamme's blade was insufficient to actually cut his flesh, but the contact hurt. A fiery burning puckered the flesh of his side, and Tharizdun's perfectlooking skin grew swollen and lIvid where the edge had struck.

The pain and the fury caused Tharizdun to lose control of his form, and he metamorphosed into a monstrous parody of man, a fiend with a visage more hideous than any demon's, eyes more baleful than those of Asmodeus himself. He brought the battleaxe around and down, striking the small man a glancing blow that knocked him away to the left. That allowed Tharizdun to have the two-bladed weapon at the ready before Gord could thrust or cut a second time in the exchange.

"You are well named. Master of Malevolence," Gord panted, feet planted, Courflamme weaving in a delicate pattern before the archfiend's eyes. "You wield a wicked stroke with that axe of yours, and your ugliness is beyond description. What will my next touch do, cause you to change into a dungpile?" It was not merely a taunt, a ploy to disconcert his adversary. Despite the pierced armor and small cut that the blade of Tharizdun's axe had inflicted, he saw how telling his attack had been. Power surged through Gord's whole body, and with it came a calm confidence. Above came the hiss and splatter of the molten adamantite as it slowly oozed downward. He could engage and best Tharizdun here long enough for the stuff to have its way. Then, even though the great axe could become two smaller ones, Gord knew his longsword would pierce the evil flesh of his adversary and end the threat of Tharizdun forever.

The same realization came upon Tharizdun that very moment. "**I am not ready**!" the being of Evil bawled as if calling upon the multiverse for succor. It was a protest at being not fully in his wicked power and glory, and it was a cry too against his own imminent end. "**Darkness! Come**!"

A deep, monotonous voice spoke. "No evil comes to your aid, being of utmost bane. Will you accept the help I offer?"

"**Yes, yes! Whomever or whatever you may he, I eagerly accept your aid**!"

"There is the price of sharing. . .

"**To the fullness of your deserved honor shall I grant that** — " and then Tharizdun had to break off in order to fight again, for Gord had closed and attacked hotly when the new presence in the chamber became evident.

With a rapid and deadly series of cuts and thrusts Gord fought. The new ally that came to Tharizdun was one known to Gord, for it was none other than that entity that called itself Lord of Entropy. Even if the thing could lend no direct support to the black foe, the young champion was certain that the entity could somehow unbalance the situation, allow Tharizdun a chance of victory. Unlike the malign deity, Gord knew that the only real chance he had to stand against his terrible opponent was here and now. He understood all too well that if the Ultimate Evil ever roamed free, then it would be as if he were a mouse attempting to fight a tlger.

He took wild chances then, trusting to his speed, reflexes, and skill to save him from death. The great battleaxe did find its mark again and again, but no telling blow was struck in return, Gord plied Courflamme, and the once-fair skin of Tharizdun became a mottled patchwork of welts and little cuts that oozed gelatlnous blood. "Now, master of maggots, let's hear more of your whining!" he gasped as a particularly heavy overhand stroke hacked down upon Tharizdun's shoulder.

Reeling back sending forth a string of ineffable curses at the gray-eyed champion, Tharizdun tried to gain enough distance to allow his huge axe better play. On an intuitive urge, the archfiend suddenly dropped to one knee and lashed out with his right arm, arcing the battleaxe parallel to the floor at knee height. The spiked top of it struck Gord's armored legs, and the man fell rolling. Tharizdun Jumped upright again, and in the interval when his adversary was regaining his own feet, the being of Evil again caused his weapon to become two.

"**Where is the assistance**?" He shouted the words even as he leaped toward the champion. At close quarters, Tharizdun knew full well his small hatchets would have great effect, but Gord's agility would soon enough put

the two at sword's length again. It was only a momentary advantage. Tharizdun had to have some outside agency lend him help!

Both wildly swung axes missed their mark, one fended off by Courflamme's quillons, the other going wide of Gord's left shoulder. Even as that happened, Gord's years of training as swordsman and acrobat proved their worth. He slipped under the taller opponent's guard, sprang away to Tharizdun's rear, and then cut sideways with a two-handed scything blow that had the force of a pirouette added to it. This time the blade actually drew a spurt of blood as its edge cut a thin line on the evil being's nearly impervious flesh. "You may be the greatest of all netherbeings, maggot; but you are a poor fighter!" Gord panted as he again circled to gain a position that both prevented Tharizdun from attaining the door and kept the deity of Evil at a distance.

He was right Tharizdun knew that. Great, powerful, the darkest force of wickedness known — that was true, but such did not speak to Tharizdun's indIvidual prowess with ordinary weapons. In his prime, the dark being could destroy minds, shatter spirits, and utilize dweomers as no other could. Were he whole and filled with eldritch powers drawn from the nadir of the cosmos, Tharizdun could have bested the champion of Balance by drawing upon arcane forces to counterbalance Gord's skill and the power of Courflamme. At this moment, however, the difference in relative capacities in melee was beginning to tell. As Gord struck and moved and spoke, the ancient malevolence could manage no reply. The dark being was wondering only when the voice that had promised assistance would deliver the succor. That Gord was aware of the entity and seemed unconcerned troubled Tharizdun. Was this to be the finish? Impossible! After all the time, centuries of sleep filled with dreams of return and red revenge, nightmares of powerlessness, and the sweet foretaste of reawakening power, he could not be stopped here on the threshold of opportunity! Because the small man kept a distance, the darkest of evils again transformed his weapon into the great war axe.

"**If you desire a fencing lesson, mortal fool, you shall have one**!" Tharizdun finally said, crying with boldness he did not feel. The ploy was simply to give a bit more time for Lord Entropy to lend his aid.

Unknown to Gord, the formless thing was indeed at work on behalf of the Ultimate One of Darkness. Entropy had immediately transferred itself to the

chamber above where the dweomers of Light were at work on the metal that imprisoned Tharizdun. The entity settled itself carefully, and for a minute or two all of the multiverse save the small portion of nowhen and nowhere in which Tharizdun's prison existed was relieved of the burden of Entropy's weight. The entity condensed all of itself there, and on a single small area too. No substance, physical, mental, spiritual, is infinite in its form and existence. Where Entropy rested, and the adamantite felt the effect that ten billion years would bring. Suddenly the blue metal became nothing. There was a hole in the cage; an escape route now existed. "Come up to me, Tharizdun," Lord Entropy said telepathically.

Gord heard that message. He redoubled his efforts, but the massive axe kept him back far enough to enable the greatest one of Evil to back his way to the stairway. "Coward!" the young champion shouted as Tharizdun bounded up the steps.

"**Fool**!" Tharizdun shouted back. Then he saw the opening with its amorphous darkness that was the entity and leaped through to the freedom beyond.

I will return soon, Gord the Cursed, to hunt you down and finish you. yours will be the slowest and most painful of deaths imaginable! do watt for me. . .

It was a mental message, of course, that last. It came as Tharizdun went winging across the spheres. Not certain whether his foe would hear or not, Gord responded staunchly. "Be sure to do that, maggot, for I'll expect a better fight when next we meet."

Chapter 18

IT HAD BEEN ALL THEY COULD MANAGE to remain where they stood. Either their own abilities or the power of the rings would normally have enabled Gellor and Leda to ascertain what was happening within the castle's great tower, but neither method availed. Just as the troubador grew so restless that he was about to disobey Gord and return to the interior of the fortress, his mind received his friend's urgent plea for energy:

". . . send me the force held within your rings," Gord had telepathically demanded.

Even as Gellor concentrated, willing the energy that lay in the golden circlet to flow to Gord, the bard looked toward Leda. The dark elfs lovely face was also etched with furrows of concentration. She too had heard the message and was complying.

Neither was certain just what forces were contained in their respective rings, or how best to supply the dweomered energy to their comrade, but each did the utmost to serve as a conduit. Suddenly there was a visible flashing, a ray of force that sprang from each ring. These rays combined and shot into the castle's ever -darker mass with a sound like a triumphant chorus of celestial voices.

"I feel weak," Leda said, swaying on her feet.

Gellor supported the little elven girl with his arm. "It was the power of the rings," he said. "We succeeded in giving Gord whatever was held fast by these bands. Let us hope it was sufficient, for now I am as drained as you, Leda. I couldn't hold a sword now to defend myself against a stripling hobgoblin."

Though the enervation brought both sudden feebleness, the recovery came as quickly. In the space of a hundred heartbeats the two went from near debilitation to vigorousness again; and with the renewal of strength came a sense of new power and capacity.

"We succeeded!" Leda cried triumphantly. "Now we must return to Gord's side."

Gellor was again trying to pierce the veils that surrounded the grim citadel. The growing evil hampered that, and the sheathing of adamantite precluded penetration of the place in which the troubador knew his young

comrade now fought Tharizdun. "Wait, Leda. Just wait a little yet. If there is no signal from him soon . ." Just then there was a sudden darkening and heaviness quite unlike the slow insinuation of malign nature that the evil archfiend had caused in his reawakening. Gellor broke off to ask, "What invidious force is this?"

Leda couldn't mistake the presence. "It is the Lord of Entropy! He has come to undo our work. . . ."

"No need to be despondent, girl! Gord's quest is shared by us all, now. Don't we have three rings? Does he not obtain our help? Ask for our power?"

"Yes, but he now fights alone against two enemies."

"You said 'our' work and that is plainly true. We three fight together. Gord now faces Tharizdun and the entity alone because that is what he commanded. What course now, though? Can you sense any clue, Leda?"

She paused, concentrating. "No. There is . . . nothing. I say that if we believe the situation altered, doubt Gord's capacity to handle it, we must perforce disobey his instructions. Let's rejoin him now!"

The troubador hesitated, weighing the prospects. "Wait. We must wait just a little yet."

"You wait if you wish, old man," Leda cried. "I can't stand here another moment while Gord fights those two all alone!"

He watched the dark elf step back into the fortress, torn between his own desire to follow her and what Gord had said. Then there came an all-pervasive laughter, as evil a sound of glee as the energy from the rings had been righteous. "Leda! Come back! The archfiend is free!" Shouting this, Gellor ran inside himself, seeking her inside the castle's now lightless confines. There came a sudden glow from just ahead, as if a wizard had cast enchanted light to counter the gloom. As if in response, soft illumination came from him too, the glow as golden as the light ahead was silvery. "Leda!" he cried again. "At least wait for me!"

"Hurry, then! I know the way to the keep," Leda shouted back Then she paused until the amberglowing Gellor was near. "There, down that hallway," the dark elven priestess said. "We must follow that to the corridor to the vaulted chamber beyond. The staircase — "

"Yes, yes. I recall," Gellor said puffing a little from the exertion and excitement. "I'll take the lead, for I have a sword. Stay close!" He and Leda had not gone half of the hall's distance, however, when an azure light filled its far end.

"What are you two doing in here?" Gord demanded as he ran toward the two. "This whole place is about to crumble. Rim for your lives!" He was up with than in an instant, shoving at their backs in order to speed them onward. "Out — we have to get out!"

Great hunks of sooty stone were raining down around the three as they shot out of the castle, gasping for breath. The bridgeway across the chasm was beginning to show signs of disintegration too, so there was no respite. They ran on, making their way across the perilously swaying span as the central tower rumbled into a thunderous crescendo of collapse. From that epicenter the destruction proceeded, until the outer curtain walls of the citadel began to fall into ruin. They had just cleared the bridge when it cracked and splintered, dropping away soundlessly into the bottomless space it had arched over. The once-bright quicksilver was now pitchy and brittle stuff of unguessable sort, it seemed, as they dragged each other onward, finally managing to clear the tall outwork as it too crashed into rubble.

They fell gasping at a place where the tumbling blocks of obsidian-hued stone rolled near as would breakers at the ocean's shore, their place Just beyond the farthest danger. "What happened?" Leda managed to get out. Then she looked at her love. "You're not badly hurt, are you?"

"The bastard! It was Entropy. He somehow managed to breach the prison. Tharizdun escaped then — just as I had him!"

"You were outfighting the Ultimate Evil?" Gellor's disbelief was very much in evidence despite the rasping voice that their recent flight forced from him.

"He is the Champion," Leda sniffed.

"He is right, Leda. Listen to the wisdom of our friend," Gord responded after drawing several deep breaths. "Never again will there be such an opportunity as I had just then. Tharizdun was newly awakened, muddled, only half what he will soon be. I could have — would have! — sent him into the void forever more had not the Lord of Entropy interfered."

"What will we do?"

"Gather our own resources and prepare for a second battle. There is no other option. If we sought to avoid it, Tharizdun would certainly come to seek us out. No, there is but one thing to do. Ready and then find that maggot before he has the opportunity to become fully prepared."

Gellor nodded somberly. "I must agree. It is the only course we have. How long before the darkest is able to draw into his being the full might of the netherspheres?"

"The demons will resist!" Leda interjected.

"Aye, that they will. Tharizdun will go into the pits of Hades first, absorb the powers there, then do likewise in the infernal regions. Demonium will be his last stop in the lower worlds, that is certain." Gord took a moment to quaff a small amount of elixir from a little flask he had drawn from his belt pouch. He offered it to his comrades, and both Leda and Gellor sipped. "Refreshing, isn't it? It is something which the wizard aichemist Keogh gave to me. ..." He shook his head, dispelling whatever thoughts of the Lords of Balance were surfacing. "To the problem at hand. If all of the demons in the Abyss unite to combat Tharizdun, they could not hold out a moon's cycle. Never will those contentious ones join forces, so it will be less than a month. Then Tharizdun will have the force of demonic dweomer, too."

"You mean in a fortnight or so, the dreaded Evil will be fully revitalized?"

"No, Gellor. In fact, until he manages to slay me, the maggot will never gain his full strength!"

Leda was mystified at such an assertion. "What makes you say that, Gord? I too know a little of Tharizdun. and there is no abridgement of his evil because of the existence of a champion to oppose him."

Gord smiled a hard, mirthless grin. It was almost as if he were a panther growling at some other creature that dared to come too close. "The grublord was kind enough to give me a bit of his potential," he grated.

"Please be more specific, my young friend," the bard said softly. "We are part of this fight, no?"

"Yes." Gord agreed simply. Then he drew the bag that had been strapped over his shoulder and laid it down before them. Undoing the thongs that tied it shut, Gord reached in and pulled forth the skull by its flaxen hair. "Tharizdun neglected to consume the boy fully in his vampiric, cannibalistic feast. Until he gams this head from me and devours it, the darkest of maggots will not have full use of his own brain!"

His friends listened in horrified fascination as Gord proceeded to describe to them what Tharizdun had done and recreated for the view of his adversary. "He hoped to make me impotent by such a ghastly display. But I was able to resist, and then it was too late — he could find no opportunity to regain the grisly trophy he had flung at me." The Lords of Light, Gord said, must have made the boy as one would create a clone when Tharizdun was bound fast. That made Leda shudder. "No true reproduction of the darkest, though. The boy was an aging imp. He was the receptacle of those thoughts and forces that could not be submerged in comatose slumber when the greatest of the malevolent was confined." Of course, he surmised, the child-Tharizdun was neither smart nor strong enough to attempt any loosening of the bonds that held him and his progenitor fast in the castle's tower. "He was merely a boy who epitomized evil in childish form."

"Then what would have occurred had Tharizdun not . . . not done as he did?" asked the elven girl in revulsion.

"Perhaps the boy would then have had the nourishment to mature, to become a true twin of Tharizdun, but neither would have been as strong as the original, even assuming that two such beings could agree to work in concert. The boy was Tharizdun only in the sense that it was a thing which held a portion of the darkest one's powers. Now had I slain Tharizdun and the boy survived, then perhaps ..."

"We would have more time," Gellor ventured, "but the same end result"

"That seems plausible. But the actuality is otherwise, and we have a dual problem too. The Lord of Entropy now allies with the darkest."

There can only be one reason for that," Leda said angrily. "By that means the entity will hasten the end of all. Is there nothing which we can do to counter the alliance?"

"Surely. Gord, the deepest wickedness will never agree to share with the Lord of Entropy?" the bard observed. The alliance cannot survive a week."

"A sennight of eons. Gellor. Tharizdun lacks the faculty to reason properly in some narrow areas. Remember that Entropy will have no Joy in oppressing, not the least desire to rule Evil. The entity will only require certain actions on Tharizdun's part, mere triflings which will probably please the darkest. A slaughter here, destruction there, an end to some opposing drives — joy, hope, creativity. Then will the final steps move more swiftly. Tharizdun will rule supreme, but Lord Entropy will lurk ever closer, and soon thereafter will stillness come over endless nothing, and the realm of Entropy will be complete. Tharizdun's force will expire in a whimpering at the last."

"Let us give the head to Tharizdun then, for it will allow him to discover the entity's design." suggested Leda.

"Perhaps it would, but the selfishness of the most malign is so great that the result would likely not be as we would hope, and I — we — would then have no chance of defeating the maggot!"

"Do we have any hope of that now, Gord?"

"Gellor, I believe that we do. I have kept certain information from you, I now admit." When he observed the expressions on his friends' faces, Gord was apologetic. "Do not be hurt or offended — It was because the foe had to be kept ignorant. Besides, I am not sure that we can actually expect active help. I am also unsure of how useful aid will be if it is granted to us."

"I can accept your determination to keep your own counsel," Gellor said. "I have suspected something ever since our sojourn in the depths of demonium. You seemed to have inspiration, fresh direction, as it were, when we were there and you were sunk into introspection."

"That's all very well and good, you two," Leda said impatiently. "Please share the news with me. What allies do we have?"

Gord took her hand, gave her a kiss on her forehead. "Hush, girl. You and Gellor will know soon enough. We need to restore ourselves quickly now and move along. There is much travel to accomplish, and who can say what will lie in wait along the road?"

"What path do we follow, Gord?"

"First we seek the end of Law. If we attain that, we must go to the uttermost extreme of Tolerance."

"Order is anathema to my— "

"I know, Leda. Yet if you would share in this thing, then you must be willing to endure that."

"If I understand you aright, Gord," the troubador remarked, "then I too will not find the passage easy. Perhaps I miss the mark, but the second destination suggests some— "

"I suggest that we all refrain from further discourse, dear friends! Of all places, this is one which must see us no more. Are you both ready to begin again?"

They understood. Gellor said no more about where he thought they had to journey, and Leda asked no more, voiced no objections. It was a simple matter for them to walk out of the strange plane. Just as if the three were going along a material track they strode back down the mountainlike terrain and soon arrived at the verge where the Empyreal Sphere commenced.

"Now we will benefit further from these bands forged by Weal," Gord said confidently. "The rings will enable us to move quickly through the upper planes to reach the Sphere of Order. If we find an ally there, then will be time enough to regain our strength and repair the damage taken from this battle."

From the place of fire and hue they entered clear light, crossed the Celestial Sphere, then the sphere of creative energy. Many paths wended from there, but Gord directed their steps along the one of astral way, then into the aethereal, and finally the three tired wayfarers came to where the Realm of Regularity lay. In successively more trying stages they then trekked further. Beyond the frontiers of Regularity was the rigid place of Law, and that was but the province of Order. The strange and inflexible beings inhabiting those realms attempted to interfere with the three heroes, for not even Gellor was so structured in his ethos that his aura would pass unnoticed. Their inner strength, the force imbued in Gord and Gellor too, and the great dweomers still resting in the rings enabled them to pass unhindered.

"It is as if we suddenly became ethereal and those who seek to hinder remain in gross form," Leda noted admiringly after they bypassed a succession of ever greater and more hostilely inclined creatures.

She was nearly correct. They used the littleknown vestiges of other spheres to slip from such ones seeking to bar their progress. Here it was indeed the Aethereal that served, there Shadowrealm impinged, and too there was the ever-narrowing plane of Chance. At last their surroundings altered.

"We are?" Gellor inquired.

"At the extremity of all Order," Gord announced. "We now tread on the Realm of Uniformity, a wedgeshaped plane, my friends. We cannot fail to reach our goal here!"

Leda was filled with curiosity, but she would give neither of the men the satisfaction of asking. Gord knew, and Gellor seemed to be aware of their destination too. Very well, she would simply bide her time and await the arrival. She marched ahead with firmness of step and aloof air. Progress was made as easy by their rings as if the three wore the famed league-long striders whose every step carried the wearer fully three miles along. Gord set a pace that made them all have to save their strength and breath to sustain it. The confines of the sphere grew narrower, and that too compressed them somehow so it was exhausting work to progress. Ever more narrow grew the vista, and so too the difficulty experienced in forcing themselves to move ever onward. It was as if they traveled but time stood still.

"How much farther?" asked Gellor, and Gord saw that the bard was pallid and drawn from the strain of the passage. "I am sorry, comrade, but if there is yet a long way to go, I will have to rest — or you two will have to go on alone."

Leda, glad for the slowing of the pace, felt that she was likewise at the end of her endurance, but somehow she managed to say "I will help you along, dear bard, and Gord will lend me his arm. We three are not to be separated now!"

"Quite so, quite so," agreed a dry and ancient voice. A man of venerable appearance stood before them on a little hillock of sand.

"Ah, Chronos! We have found your abode at last!"

"And about time, too," the old fellow cackled. It was a merry and vigorous humor that belied his decrepit appearance.

In fact, Leda noted, much about the ancient man seemed contradictory. There were muscles there beneath the wrinkled and weatherbeaten skin, and Chronos's eyes were those of a young and inquisitive child, while his white hair and beard were as thick as any swain's thatch. "Chronos? You are . . . ?"

"Proctor Chronos, just as you thought when you truly looked at me," the strange fellow responded. "You are Leda, and he is Gellor," the master of the dimension of time said with a smile toward the oneeyed man beside Leda. "That's not news to you, though, is it, worthy troubador? No, of course not. You have more than ample ability to read my plain and homely aura, I'd say." He combed his long beard with his fingers, shaking his head sadly. "I know I am going on as would a dotard, but the assault of Entropy there in the high prison fairly addled me — wont recover from that for an age! No, that's a certainty. Won't lightly pass the offense off, either!"

"You aided me in the past—"

"No such thing!" Proctor Chronos contradicted quarrelsomely. "Past, present, future — all the same, don't you know? Think boy! You've been in Shadowrealm, haven't you? Of course, of course ..." and he paused to gaze at Gellor and the dark elven girl as if seeking their affirmation. "Time is just the same in its form, so to speak. Flows along right back to where it came from in a loop! Don't let anyone fool you. It's as if there were but a single side, a single verge, so no matter where you go in the stream you're in the same place — sort of."

Gord smiled. "Your sagacity is of the ages of time, Proctor. You did lend me aid. . . ."

"Certainly. Helped you and that bard there so you could get the girl and those blamed Theorparts. Still in all, that didn't give the Lord of Entropy cause for the attack!"

Gellor was more than a little confused by that. "I crave your pardon for the seeming offense of this question, Proctor Chronos, but aren't you — that is. Time — and the Lord of Entropy one and the same, or closely related allies?"

"What? Never! Never, do you hear? If the entity ever gains his domain, why, there will be no time at all, none! Chronos and Entropy are at opposite ends. I measure events, put the proper and necessary limits and boundaries

to things. In Entropy's kingdom there is nothing, stasis. How can time exist there? Can't, of course!" Then he peered closely at the grizzled troubador. "What savants have you studied under?"

Gellor looked abashed, and Leda had difficulty suppressing a giggle. Gord stepped in to rescue the situation. "When the Lord of Entropy brought his entire force to bear upon the adamantite sheathing of the prison which held the evillest one, then he was violating your precincts?"

"That is just so," Proctor Chronos agreed with a scowl at the thought of Entropy's temerity. "That thing forced a distortion of the stream of the weight of its entlre existence concentrated there. Think of it as a behemoth stepping into the stream and causing the soft bottom to sink. The fluidity of time drained into the depression, swirled and grew deep. It was so collected, in fact, that in other places the cosmos was without its measure for a . . . a . . . um . . ." The fellow paused and scratched his head. "It brought an unaccounted-for interval!"

"Unthinkable!" Leda said.

"Unforgivable," Gellor concurred dryly.

"And so you now agree to assist us further, as I understand," Gord stated, directing the conversation back to where he had been trying to keep it.

"But of course, champion. That's why I sent you the message. You did receive it, didn't you?"

"No."

"That unmeasured jackanapes! Entropy slowing things again, is he? Well, we'll see about that. Come along! We must be moving along now. Time is not to be wasted, and it is high time to bring the culprit to an accounting!"

Proctor Chronos had no scythe as was usually depicted as his instrument. He employed neither a sand glass nor water clock nor even a candle. From inside his togalike garment the Master of Time brought forth a strange thing that was of globular form. First it showed a billion blazing motes, then it shifted to but a few specks that whirled in orbits around the larger mote in the center. As if annoyed at the sphere, Chronos gave it a shake, and it again changed to depict many translucent little orbs inside the greater one of itself, and the multihued balls overlapped and interposed one another in a most confusing manner. "Aaah, that's better," Proctor Chronos muttered, not

at all confused by the sight of his device. He studied it for a few minutes, then shook it once more. It changed instantly into a ribbon of sandy stuff that seemed to flow without actually moving at all. The master of time whipped the length of that material around his waist as if it were a sash, gave one end a half-turn, and then placed it over the other. The two merged, and Proctor Chronos smiled, his eyes bright and lively with mirth. "Now we go to the House of Option."

"We do not move backward to change what Entropy did?" Gellor inquired with some concern.

"How often must I reiterate it? There is no forward nor back," Chronos said with some irritability evident. "Besides, I would be in violation of my own standards if I tried to change occurrences such as that which are of timely sort. It occurred, and that is that. Now come along!"

The ancient proctor stepped off with a lively step. The three heroes followed. Although it seemed as if they walked on a treadmill, for the sandy soil beneath their feet seemed unchanging, the scene around them changed and flowed swiftly. Every so many paces the appearance of the Master of Time altered as well. At first he grew younger, seeming to become a man of but seventy or so years, then but sixty. What caused the mutation was impossible to judge, for things all around sped past so swiftly that the three saw only a blur of color, heard a babble of sound occasionally, as well as smelled fleeting hints of varied odors, and that confused their senses greatly. Then Proctor Chronos began to grow. He thickened, shot up inches, then became quite fat, and finally the Master of Time was a giant who still stumped along heavily before Gord, Leda, and Gellor.

"He grows vaster still," Leda whispered in Gord's ear as they went on.

"It is because the region of the multiverse we now travel has a very intense concentration of time."

The bard couldn't help overhearing the exchange. He was somewhat uncertain of exactly what his young friend referred to. "A concentration? That is contrary to the concept of time, Gord. Time is a measure of equal or unequal intervals which record data, the lives of creatures, and so forth."

"That is so, but that does not contradict what I told Leda. Time is intense here because it is measured at fine and precise intervals as well as at irregular but important ones. It is concentrated too, meaning that there are

many streams present," the young champion added with a touch of smugness.

"Stop that, Gord," Leda scolded. "You can behave as a sage might because you know our destination. If you had informed Gellor and me, then you wouldn't have the advantage. I believe you keep us in the dark to make just such points."

She was only jesting, but Gord cringed in mock suffering from the admonition. "Please, no more. I am contrite. Do take note, though, that on past occasions the wise and learned troubador has used similar opportunities to make me appear a — "

"Never mind, dear lady," Gellor said haughtily. "This former pupil — and he was a slow and thick one, let me tell you — merely shows off to demonstrate ability beyond his instructor's ken. His example is sufficient to allow the discerning mind a true and stark depiction of the relative merits of our widely diverse mental—"

"Gellor!" This time Leda was shaking her finger. "Now you are being the pedant, and insufferably so, too. What has gotten into you two?"

"I merely sought to lighten the mood," Gellor said sheepishly.

Gord was solemn again, after grinning at his friend's ranting. "We act so, my love, because the burden of what is before is too heavy to bear continuously."

"Oh ... of course. I had almost forgotten about Tharizdun just now."

"Excellent," boomed the voice of Proctor Chronos. "I plan to see that time takes no note of that . . . 'maggot,' as Champion Gord has named him .. . soon now."

The Master of Time was standing before them, a veritable colossus of middling years and muscles that would have shamed the strongest of the titans. "Although Lady Tolerance and I do not always see eye to eye, as you human folk put it, she is a charming and wonderful hostess."

"We are not seeking entertainments," Gord snapped without thinking.

"No? Well, I remind you that she is also a most powerful— "

"That is enough from you, Chronos! The voice came from a female figure of similar build to the Master of Time. "I will speak for myself in my

own domain, thank you." Then, as if to show she meant no offense, the lady took Proctor Chronos by his arm and led him into the formal garden that seemed to have simply appeared instantly before the group. "Come along. Champion Gord, Heroine Leda, and Hero Gellor. You are all most welcome visitors to the House of the Fifth Dimension."

The woman — being, correctly, although she appeared now as a giant human because it suited the situation — told the three that she was the ruler of Probability, the fifth dimension. "I observed what was likely to happen, and sent Chronos to your aid, Gord, when you and your comrades were there in.

"You did no such thing!" the Master of Time countered. "It was I who suggested that you allow a greater possibility of equivalence, and thus the compact of the exchange of the relic for the girl was negated."

"I thank you both," Gord said. "We are here for an important reason which is yet before us. Tharizdun now roams free in the cosmos. He gains strength, gathers power, and soon he will come to search me out for it seems I am the only obstacle between him and total subjugation of all things."

"We know that" Chronos said. "But Lord Entropy unbalanced the contest."

Lady Tolerance raised her hand. "Not quite so. The possibility of the entity doing that was there, and it occurred. It was interference, though, and too much so. Entropy has meddled in the whole affair far beyond the boundaries of plausibility. Thus you are here in my house, and thus can I give you some assistance."

"Will you then distill history so that no interference occurred?"

"No more than Chronos here would, no. I am Lady Tolerance, after all. I must allow all things, even those which are inimical to my very existence such as multiple probabilitles existing simultaneously. The Lord of Entropy is one such opposer, and the most deadly, I must add. Some imagine that old Chronos might be, but I spin out new lines and he busily marks and measures them. Probability and alternatives allow him to both be ever busy and persistent too."

"Exactly so, my lady. Time does dwindle away in some aspects of the multiverse, but this wise and generous one sustains new branches."

"Well, at least a mark and dIvide, allowing the new if the cause is sufficiently diverse to warrant another difference. Sometimes I simply allow an action to have effect only within the limited space allowed by the four lower dimensions, you know."

"Limited? You imply some lesser status, I think!" Chronos began to berate their hostess, and soon both were involved in a heated dispute. The matter was one of existence, with probability and time so intermixed that soon neither of these beings seemed able to untangle the mesh of their webs of argumentation. Time fostered probability in that given a sufficiently long interval anything, or almost anything, could and would occur. Chance, on the other hand, both measured and confined time. Did absolute uniformity negate chance and thus engender time? Only temporarily, for uniformity was subject to Entropy's assaults more readily than chaotic diversity. And so it went.

Although the three of them had seated themselves in the chairs that were in the garden of Lady Tolerance, it was disconcerting to witness the dispute, for as she argued the mistress of probability tended to emphasize her points by altering the setting. That included the garden and chairs too. "Aahemmm!" Gord finally coughed, sitting uncomfortably upon a six-legged stool that was at least seven feet high. "There is still the matter of Tharizdun. . . ."

Lady Tolerance uttered an exclamation of annoyance. It was directed at herself. Gord suddenly found himself sprawling in a vast sofa, his companions likewise seated, and the setting surrounding them was some weird and improbably futuristic one. Crystalclear glass walled them in, plants were everywhere in sight, being set into strange barrels and tubs, dweomered illumination sprang from milk-hued globes and metal-headed objects of serpentine form. Low tables of metal and glass, wicker furniture, malformed paintings, odd pottery in strange shapes serving as a curious touch.

"What place is this?" Gord inquired, almost voicing his concern that they might border on the realms of Tharizdun.

"It is one which is drawn from a distant parallel of chance, not time. Be assured it Is of the safest sort also. Do you like the style?"

"I must tell you. Lady Tolerance, that never have I seen such in all of my many travels. . . ."

"Thank you. Please be my guests for the time. Proctor Chronos and I must confer as to the nature of our involvement in the matter. You three need to restore yourselves, I know."

Time is ample here, for I confer it In abundance," Chronos told them as he arose to accompany the Mistress of Probability elsewhere. "It will seem but moments before we are back, but time and probability will serve to mend all of your hurts, revitalize you. Make use of it wisely!"

They left and Leda looked at Gord and Gellor, asking, "What have we gotten into?"

The only opportunity for survival, girl," the bard ventured, and the young champion next to him agreed.

Chapter 19

IT WAS REFRESHING after a million groveling devils and daemons to see only a handful of half-defiant demons enter to stand before him. Tharizdun gave no greeting, no welcome to these creatures who defied the rest of the Abyss in coming here to pledge fealty. There was a prince of their kind amongst the assemblage.

"**You, the one called bulumuz, come first and prostrate yourself**," Tharizdun commanded harshly.

The demon prince stepped forward boldly and, rather than doing as ordered, simply bent knee and head. "I am your servant. Greatest of Malevolence!"

Tharizdun arose, grew, and became nearly amorphous as he did so. Suddenly a tentacle-like pseudopod shot from his mass and yanked the now-snarling and bellowing demon lord into the huge body mass. Tharizdun's substance became transparent, so that all the others there could see the horrible digestion of Bulumuz. It took a long time, and the muffled shrieks of the one inside were audible to the viewers as well.

Then Tharizdun resumed his manlike form and sat back in his plain chair. "**That one was rebellious. He fakes to justify he existence. I consumes him fully, and the force that was he now resides in me. Go back to demonium, you few. Inform all there that I shall do the same to them, all the lords of the Abyss, unless they immediately accept my absolute sovereignty**!" The remaining demons started to shuffle off.

"**But before you leave**," the darkest of Evil drawled, halting them in mid-stride "**there is one other thing you must note. You**!" he said, pointing to one of the consumed prince's fellows. "**Step forward and prostrate yourself**."

Trembling visibly in obedience, the demon did just that, falling upon his face at Tharizdun's feet. The ultimate one of darkness kicked the demon lightly. "**You are not Bulumuz**," he announced, "**and in you a greater dweomer than the former prince of that name possessed. There is no lord amongst you that can not be replaced thus. Tell that to all, Graz'zt and Orcus, and all of the kinglets**!"

The group of them left hurriedly as soon as given leave, glad to have survived and hoping that their early homage would make them greater in vassalage than they now were within independent demonium. "**Stupid and wild brawlers**," Tharizdun said cynically. "**but bullies and louts serve a purpose, too**."

"That was a very sly trick Tharizdun. Only I amongst all noticed you used your will to make the demon lord unable to obey. A self-created object lesson. It will go far in hastening the submission of most of those demons whom you would use."

The greatest of Evil scowled at the formless darkness nearby. "**I gave you no leave to speak, Entropy**."

"I need no such leave, but I shall elect to remain silent most of the time in any event, so have no fear. I won't disturb your machinations. In fact, and quite to the contrary," the entity droned on, "I intend to help you and make vital suggestions as needed. You are free, thanks to me, and your total domination of the cosmos will be hastened through my efforts."

"**Is that so**?" Tharizdun sneered. "**And what if I refuse to heed your maunderings**?"

"I will exert myself against you," came the simple answer. "Do you care to oppose yourself against such weight?"

Tharizdun stood up and paced angrily. "**I made no compact**," he finally said after much time. "**I will use my own eldritch force to drive you hence**."

"But you did compact with me, as well you know. Like it or not, you made your own cause a collateral of my own. You must accept me and hear my voice. Some things cannot be avoided, Tharizdun."

"**If we are thus the same, go and seek out the enemy champion. come back with the soul of that man, and I will elevate you to absolute coequal**."

"Elevate? No matter. You would never willingly do that, as we both know, and I have no desire to be despotic ruler of such a cosmos as you plan. It will suffice for me to be a silent advisor now and then. As to the one named Gord, I am unable to harm him directly, just as he is powerless to

affect me. Haven't you drawn sufficient powers from the subject netherspheres to make you confident of victory?"

"**There is never sufficent of anything until one has all**!" Tharizdun barked in retort "**Who knows what trick and stratagem the rightminded little fool will attempt? Had I only not . . .**"

"Not what Tharizdun?"

"**Not . . . not . . . Shit! Something causes me to be unable to recall the detail. the champion of the enemy has managed to withhold some advantage he gained. I am stronger now than ever befor, and soon I'll have the demonic energy too. yet I am not whole**!"

It was mildly disturbing to the lord of Entropy that Tharizdun spoke thus, and a little annoying to the entity that he had no clue as to what the being of malice really lacked. "The circumstances should make you doubly glad that we are allies then, Tharizdun."

"**I am never pleased with allies, slow-speaking dolt! I am happy to have subjects, servants, thralls! Yet in this one case I do accept alliance. Yes, Lord of Entropy, you speak most persuasively. I shall remain your ally, you mine, so that we may cooperatively annihilate the foe**."

"A certainty when I participate, but you must swiftly conclude your gathering of energy, Tharizdun. Until all of the netherspheres are subject to your will, you cannot close upon the forces of malign order nor evil chaos; both are needed to tap the stream of destructive antimatter which will be the culmination of your greatness."

The Uttermost of the Netherworlds drew back at Entropy's suggestion. "**Do you think I am totally mad? Have no thought save lust pgr domination? Draw from the great void of dark energy I will, but never will I draw such a river as you urge, entity**!"

"That is something which remains for later observation," Entropy drawled. "When do you go forth to ferret out the little man who thinks to oppose your rulership?"

Although he noted the sudden switch in tone, Tharizdun was actually pleased to hear the Lord of Entropy refer to matters in such a manner. "**It has been but a short time since I broke free of the restraints. In that time all of the ordered portions of the lower spheres have submitted,**

and so only the spheres of demonkind remain to be subjugated. In a few days, I think, as men reckon time, I will have a stream of demon lords here to give homage. let us say another week. Then I will gather my hounds and hunt the champion and his rabbits!"

Thoroughness was what Entropy admired, was what he used when reducing action to inaction, the quick to eternal stillness, hot activity to sterile chill. "What hounds, Tharizdun? I am not so knowledgeable in affairs of this sort as you might suppose."

The greatest of Evil laughed wickedly at the recollection. "**Ah, yes, dull entity, those were days, that fell age when I roamed far and wide with my pack of yeth! Did you know that mortals have it written in their myth? The truth of it is brightened, but it sends primordial shivers of fear down their weak spines nonetheless. In the face of the unyielding opposition of the Lords of Light I ventured forth with my hounds, and we fed wildly on flesh, blood, spirit, and soul too. now my hounds will be greater**!"

"What do you mean?"

"**From daemonkind I will form one, and it will obey perfectly. from the furnaces of the hells will I fashion another, and that devil-mastiff will search relentlessly. From the depths of demonium will my savage yeth be made, the hound to attack without reason. To these great ones will I add the rest — every malign form of life will be represented in the pack**."

"Such as?"

"Unliving **golems from netherchaos, the great goblins of Acheron, chimeras, dreggals, maelvis, netherhags, all**!"

The stuff of the entity deepened, and a portion glowed in interest. "Be so kind as to show me. Master of Malevolence."

Pleased at the tone and the title, Tharizdun clapped his hands and gave a call. As the shrieking wail, a sound like that of a child dying in agony perhaps, rose and then dwindled there came a distant baying in reply. The air in the huge chamber grew smoky, as if a cloud from a fire were forming. Then out of the reeking vapors burst a pack of monstrous dogs, black, and whose lolling tongues drooped from heads that were unmatched to the

canine bodies that bore them. There was one with the head of a terrible hag of nightmare, another with the grinning visage of a vampire, and beside those two were so varied an array of hideous countenances that any demonking would have been pleased to claim the lot as his own.

"**Leap, Mephisto**!" A devil-headed hound sprang obediently. "**Now, Thrax, get that one**!" and as Tharizdun gave the command he pointed at a brute whose pumpkin-round head showed it to be a megagoblin. Ferociously but efficiently, the yeth called Thrax used its daemon teeth to shred the lesser hound.

"You waste your force."

"Bah! The joy of seeing that is well worth the little effort required to shape another of the goblin sort." He turned his back on the entity and called his lead dogs. "**To me, Mephisto and Thrax**!" The yeth came slinking, growling, hellish hatred in their lambent stares. Tharizdun beat both, but he did so only perfunctorily, so no injury was done. "**Be quicker to obey, or next time it will be worse for you! now return and quiet the pack**." The two huge hounds bounded away, savaging the smaller ones immediately. There was a great yowling and snarling for a brief span; then the whole of the group of yeth hounds was as silent as death.

"**You see them? those are the ones to hunt out the foes, oh yes! As soon as I have the third, the demon-hound. I think it shall be named graz. Do you find that amusing, lord of inertia**?"

"Very amusing," the entity responded without any enthusiasm, let alone humor. "As it is of urgent requirement, the third of your greater yeth, I shall gather my presence in Pandemonium and the Abyss. The recaicitrant will be burdened by me, and your conquest thus hastened."

"**If you so choose, but I think not that it adds to any agreement between us or that these will be a debt to repay**?"

"Trouble yourself not at all on that score, archfiend. The compact we have is all that I desire. Consider this a willing effort, my special gift in honor of your return to power, Tharizdun."

As suddenly as the Lord of Entropy had come, its presence was no longer there in Tharizdun's hall. The darkest one of Evil was relieved, for as much as he hated to admit it, the entity made him uneasy, and Entropy's presence

wore on his nerves, sapped his vitality somehow. "**You will be no welcome visitor soon, thing**," Tharizdun snarled softly as he pondered the role of the master of stasis. Once in full mastery of the cosmos, the archfiend would seek and find ways to dispatch Entropy, or at worst exile the entity from the vicinity of wherever Tharizdun happened to be. Perhaps the negative forces of the anti-cosmos were the answer, one given unwittingly to him by the stupid inactive one himself. That would be delightful and ironic. How would such a thing die? Slowly, no doubt, but probably without sufficient emotion to make the spectacle worthwhile. In this case, Tharizdun reckoned, the end would be worth it even lacking the sport.

That brought him to the matter of his adversary, Gord. It had required all of his skill at dissembling, acting and lying too to keep the truth of things from the Lord of Entropy. Tharizdun pondered, recalling clearly his rash act No ally, and certainly none of the slaves, must ever know of that act of weakness. Because of the lack of that last, essential portion of what he had been, Tharizdun knew himself to be both stronger than before and yet at the same time less potent. That was why he waited to complete his pack of yeth hounds, why he still sought the assistance of the master of inertia. Not only did the archfiend need to recover the skull and consume it, he had to wait to accomplish that after dealing with a deadly adversary prepared by every force that opposed him from time immemorial, honed since his last defeat.

"**Even the demons gave to that opposition**," Tharizdun snarled, "**and such a price they will pay for that! That accursed sword wields energies drawn from ail aspects op my own domain; thus it b a weapon even I must he wary of. Yet no tool is better than the one using it, and I have the rede of the little knave who has been bequeathed with the mantle of Balance's power. Too flawed, you fools**!" The last he shouted into the empty silences of his immeasurable hall there on the plane of Hades, and none heard.

He might have been a useful servant of Tharizdun's. That the darkest noted in studying the sordid history of the one called Gord. Well, there was no turning him around now, and his disgusting principles warped the drow priestess too, so that the clone grew apart from its true form. Ah, were but Eclavdra the one assisting the champion, she would have stung him as a scorpion! The many scenes involving Gord, Leda, Gellor too, all had been replayed by the archfiend as he wielded his arcane dweomers.

"**I know my enemies now**," he reassured himself. The troubador had always been tainted with wealsome ethic, beliefs that were weak and unselfish. That one could be forgotten,despite his nasty little harp. Gellor and Leda, supernormal now, but hardly above human capability if stripped of magical bolstering. Imbued or otherwise, he could handle the pair easily enough.

In combination with Gord, the matter became more problematic. Especially since the three now bore the tokens left for just such purpose by the elders of Light. Were they separable? If so, then it would be a swatting of butterflies. Put such happy prospects aside, though. What strength did the three mortals, with their rings, constitute?

The three had improved wisdom, reasoning, senses. Two to guard the flanks of the champion, Gord armed with Courflamme, the single weapon capable of actually ending Tharizdun's existence. The little turd also kept the boy's head too! Was there more? Yes ... it was coming forth as the archfiend bent his will to the problem. Unknown agencies seemed to lend their assistance, but that help was . . puny and nonvital. Fortune was to smile upon them — no matter, Tharizdun took no chances, not any more, and he always stacked the tiles so that there were no odds in favor of his opponents.

Again, the tempo of whatever occurred would beat at a pace useful to those three. But yet again it was a matter of small consequence. The archfiend would commence the hunt only when he was ready. Until then he would stay in his now unassailable realm in the netherspheres. With time favoring him, there accrued no advantage to the foes if it briefly surged in their direction.

"**Only the sword remains. If I can negate the power of Courflamme, I can win without effort**!" Time passed as Tharizdun contemplated that. mulling over the whole of the history of the sword. Then it came to him in a flash that was inspired. "**It is of Balance, and the culmination of the ethos, the forces op that sphere's energy, are of mundane being where all others meet. Courflamme is agathokakological, a tool of Good and Evil forced in the gray neutrality of Balance. Now I have the final strategy**."

Tharizdun paused in his contemplations and gave vent to uncontrolled peals of mirth, laughter so malign that its echoes rolled beyond the precincts of even so monstrous a hall as he sat in, and the whole of the netherworld trembled at the sound. "**Let plodding master Entropy place his pall upon all he can to hinder you, gord the champion. I will use my yeth to hound you throughout the cosmos, and but one little hole will seem to be a place of safety. as hares you and your comrades will run into it, and there I'll wait. Never has there been a tool made which cannot be unmade, and I have the force which fashioned Courflamme there in the hidey-hole. It will be beaten into nothingness on the forge which formed it, and then you are mine**!"

The wave of triumphant power that followed on the heels of that shouted proclamation also washed beyond the hall. At its passing, all the denizens of the dark planes were made stronger and exulted in the vileness of the energy. Now they were glad they were slaves of the greatest master Evil had ever spawned.

Chapter 20

DARK HORDES ROLLED ACROSS DEMONIUM in a wave. Composed of millions of indIvidual soldiers, the wave performed as if It was a single entity. In a hundred places it lapped around a fortress, each such stronghold then becoming an island in a hostile and stormy sea. Everywhere else, save one single continentlike mass, was inundated by the army of Tharizdun. One after another the small islands of demonic resistance fell to the rising tlde of the Ultimate Evil's hordes as more and more spawn of the other netherspheres were sent to fight the rebellious inhabitants of the Abyss. The smallest strongholds fell initially, of course, where some petty lord of a minor race of demons tried vainly to defy Tharizdun's overlordship. The Master of All Evil would brook no such independence, and each victory brought a horrible example of the fate that any who defied him would suffer. Yet surprisingly, most of the demons were not cowed by the cruelty or the monstrous things that befell the defenders after being overwhelmed by the invading forces.

Perhaps it was not actually surprising when the nature of demonium was considered. After all, what lord of the Abyss wouldn't do the same? What demon would ever forgive defiance? Once committed to opposition, there was no alternative course, no peace ever to be made, no amnesty that would be granted. The ethos of Evil allowed only victory, and the term "vanquished" was synonymous with "exterminated." For every demon slain by the hordes under Tharizdun's banner, a score of the attackers were destroyed. Had not a quarter of the force been drawn from the Abyss itself, where a portion of the demonlords had bowed to the darkest force, then perhaps the invasion might have taken far, far longer to achieve appreciable results, make great inroads on the hundreds of planes that were demonkind's.

Tharizdun cared little about losses. Devils, daemons, maelvis, or any other of the dozen malign races under his command were but implements to be used, discarded if blunted or broken, and new ones obtained. Not that the Master of Malevolence would denude the whole of the netherspheres with such equanimity. Indeed, he needed many subjects to cany out his commands, see to his desires, and for the dutles of maintaining oppression there and elsewhere soon enough. In order to become absolute master of the cosmos, Tharizdun had first to rule all of the lower spheres. He had no

option but to subjugate the Abyss before he could turn his attention elsewhere. Demons, certainly the most vicious enemies of all opposed to Evil, were thus serving the multiverse without knowing or caring that they aided all of Weal and nonwicked dlsposition.

Tharizdun understood all too well what was occurring and raged at it. Unthinkable in any circumstance, the great war in demonium was doubly disturbing. As he sought to complete his base of power, Tharizdun had to contemplate the fact that a deadly and implacable antagonist also waited somewhere to strike. Gord, Champion of Balance, had the wherewithal to slay the greatest evil ever spawned. Let the worthless troops die in their thousands, for time now seemed to be working against Tharizdun. Edgy, always on guard against sudden assault by his foe, Tharizdun himself rode through the Abyss on the back of a three-headed fired rake. He was there to spur his hordes to greater fury in their assaults; besides, there was greater safety for him when surrounded by such troops.

The cacodemon marches of Pandemonium, where demonkin and chimeras held sway, were as difficult to subdue as demonium itself, but the sheer weight of the attacking forces Tharizdun brought to bear managed the task with rapidity, for there were no great fortresses and mighty leaders to command as there were in the Abyss. After but a period of six of Oerth's days, the Ultimate One of Evil could point to all of Pandemonium as conquered territory, and view a map of the many tiers of the Abyss that showed but a score of little islands remaining resistance. But there was one blot to reckon with, too. It was Ojukalazogadit.

Ojukalazogadit! A great stratum unto itself. The greatest of demon brutes, too. The monstrous thing was a being, perhaps even a demonking of sorts, although its only subject was itself. Ojukalazogadit could send forth portions of itself. Not a few, not a thousand. The brute demon could create a field a force of legions that were but bits of its being. Dim, demented, Ojukalazogadit the unconquerable.

During the course of the earlier wars in the Abyss, when the daemon Infestix had rallied a coalition of enemies against the would-be emperor of all demonium. Graz'zt the brute demon had served as battlefield and warrior both. With the help of it Graz'zt had almost triumphed, and through its assistance, the ebon demonking had been able to withdraw to safety after defeat there. In its madness, the thing had certainly devoured many of the

force it had allied with, but only a tithe of the number of the opposing horde that its suddenly opening mouths and rampaging portions slew and absorbed.

Now the living layer of the Abyss served as a citadel for the beleaguered demons. Graz'zt and all his remaining subjects, Elazalag and the Abat-dolor, and whatever others of the lords of demonium who could manage it retreated to the fastness of Ojukalazogadit and waited. With them they brought their arms, treasures, and herds of demon-beasts. Whether it was the feeding upon elephantine kine or the dim realization that doom threatened it, Ojukalazogadit refrained from wanton predation upon those refugees making their last stand upon it. Perhaps after the last morsel of the ferocious flocks and hideous herds of things that demons kept as would a man tend sheep and cattle, then the demon brute would devour warrior and lord in refuge. Now, the being sent forth the masses of its chimerical body to combat the dreggals and cacodaemons who tried to advance onto Ojukalazogadit's surface. They, along with turncoat demons, devils, maelvis, dumalduns, and the others of Tharizdun's millions were greedily eaten by the rampaging excretions that served to defend the brute and its refugees. Oddly then, as the Abyss was torn, weakened, and devastated, the gross stratum battened and grew stronger.

Because of this, also because of the last isolated pockets of resistance were those citadels commanded by the greatest of demons, the survivors of the sudden assault upon the Abyss broke out and moved toward the vast place that was the demon brute Ojukalazogadit. Distracted by his contemplation of the Champion of Balance, immersed in the creation of his yeth hounds. Tharizdun saw what was occurring almost too late. When he did finally take note of the movement, the Master of Malevolence drove his forces with relentless fury. The small groups of embattled demons were hunted, exterminated at times, and always decimated. Many of them survived nonetheless, and the resistance grew on the three hundred and sixty-sixth tier of the Abyss, the stratum of the demon brute, the layer that was Ojukalazogadit.

"**Entropy! The fools have played into my hands**," Tharizdun cried. "**If you are to gain your reward, it is now time for you to truly earn it. Place your inertial weight upon the dim-witted brute. Bring it to senility and decay! Then I will finish the pitiful remainder easily**."

"First, dark lord, you must assault the lesser ones massed upon the bulk of the thing. The numbers of those assisting the creature must be thinned." It was untrue, of course. The entity could have done whatever he wished then and there. Entropy cared not at all if Tharizdun knew the truth of the situation. Entropy would have more. Extermination, extlnction, and decay were all it cared for.

"**You will do what I command! Now! Now**!" Tharizdun railed.

Blithely the Lord of Entropy droned, "Yes, Ultimate Evil, as soon as your hordes have assailed the rebellious demons as I mentioned. Just after that will I obey your great command."

"**I will not undertake such an assault, fool**!" Tharizdun thundered. "**We will sit and starve them out if need be**."

Although there was no means of the darkest one's detecting it, that did make the entity rethink its strategy. If by chance Tharizdun was defeated by the champion, Gord, then all of Entropy's hopes for rule of the multiverse were dashed for a billion years, perhaps a billion decades. "I will gather myself and attack the demon brute, Tharizdun, but if I am to do so, your troops must simultaneously fall upon the others there. It will be a mass assault, or I will abandon your cause. What care I If you or the Champion of Balance prevails, if both are heedless of my wishes?"

Snarling, devising terrible tortures for the entity should he ever find a way to bring it into substance, Tharizdun protested long, but eventually gave in. "**Sweet-smelling vibrancy! Who do you believe is to rule all? Who, I ask — you**?" Entropy was silent, knowing what he knew. "**Very well, leaden lump, I agree to your terms. I will order a massed advance onto ojukalazogadit the moment your inertial force is observable by me. When I see the ponderous pressure of your being bringing doom to the life force of the brute-thing, then will my millions of warriors attack unrelentingly. they will have orders not to cease their assaults until the last demon who dared to defy my sovereignty is annihilated**."

"Excellent, Greatest of Fiends. You are truly the archfiend fit to rule the whole of the netherspheres,"

Entropy boomed in monotonous gratification. At the end of such a battle there would not be one demon in ten left to roam the Abyss. The legions of the hells would be gone, as well as the majority of all of the other

inhabitants of the other nether realms too. That made the entity recall something else. "And your pack is it ready?"

"**Oh, yes**," Tharizdun said, rubbing his hands in anticipation, almost forgetting the other, more important matters at hand. "**It is all but complete, and I feed its yeth constantly with the energies of those who were their fellows. each will be strong, full op insane fury, ready**!" A fire sprang into the archfiend's eyes. "**After they hunt down the fob, Gord, I will loose them on the mortal worlds. They need souls to sustain their vigor**!"

Had Entropy been able, the entity would have laughed, cheered, even caroled a merry ditty at that prospect it was not in its makeup, so it responded by stating, "I now will begin the work of bearing down Ojukalazogadit into extinction," and his presence vanished from Tharizdun's ken. Entropy was foreseeing a cosmos depopulated, suns dwindling to cold lumps, motion slowed, life waning ever more rapidly.

Unnatural or not Entropy did cause a sound to emanate from itself as it went about the work promised. It was as if a winter wind shrieked across great stone chimneys, sounding them as organ pipes in a minor key so bass as to be nearly inaudible. But it was a dirge of sustained notes and coming doom that Entropy felt quite pleased with.

* * *

"The whole of our wisdom is exhausted," Proctor Chronos announced. "Yet in all, I believe we have devised a plan which will confound your foe."

"That is so," agreed Lady Tolerance. "It is a simple and direct course of action which will lay Tharizdun by his heels."

"And thwart the meddling nihilist as well!" the ancient Master of Time asserted.

Gord and his two companions stood up, relieved. "Let us set to it," the young champion said with vigor. "The enemy must grow ever more deadly as he gains ground."

The Mistress of Probability hesitated, casting her peer a sidelong glance. "Well..."

"Lady Tolerance is about to say that if your 'us' means you three, then well and good. Do not include her or me in your calculations," Proctor

Chronos informed them.

"You have nothing other than a plan to give us?" The angry query sprang from Leda.

"This is intolerable," Gellor fairly snapped.

Gord remained calmer. "Your words are not encouraging up to this point, honored beings. Will you be so kind as to enlighten us three?"

"Of course. I sympathize with you, my dears," Lady Tolerance said. "I fully understand your view and your want. The Proctor is better at being direct, so he shall say what needs be said."

"The reemergence of the chief one of Evil has closed off this universe, heroes, from the remainder of the cosmos. Its gates have been slammed shut and barred fast. We must look only to the resources at hand. Is that much clear?" The Master of Time waited for assent or questions. Evidently, all three of them understood that only the spheres of existence that formed their own particular universe were now open to them — and to Tharizdun. They had no questions.

This neither strengthens or weakens either party, although it does limit options. Ravages beyond this pale are not permitted, nor can aid or refuge be found anywhere else either. When one faction or the other triumphs, then no force known can keep the many portals held shut The bounds are thus established for the battle."

"Tharizdun? Entropy? What of them?"

Proctor Chronos seemed annoyed at the interruption. "Let me go about this in an orderly fashion, one point at a time. As the Champion of Balance, you and your two associates have your greatest strength in the material realms and those that form them — the elements, shadow, thought, and all that lot. We two are only marginally involved in those places, for our concerns extend to so many other spheres and farflung locales.

"Tharizdun seeks to rule the cosmos. He must begin in this universe, just as he has. First he masters the nether realms, then captures the inner spheres, then assails the spheres of highest sort. That accomplished, the flood of his wickedness may extend well out into the multiverse. Then are Lady Tolerance and I somewhat constrained.

"Entropy rides the archfiend's coattails as a flea on a dog's tail. That flea grows greater, though, and soon after Tharizdun succeeded in his evil aspirations, it would become a mammoth crushing the host into extinction. Then would both time and probability cease to exist. Thus we are both very much desirous that you, Gord the Champion, Gellor, and Leda as well, should emerge the victors in the contest.

Tharizdun and that dull lump. Entropy, even now seek to complete the next step of the whole. They are near to conquering the whole of demonium. That is the nexus of the plan."

Tharizdun's taking of the Abyss?"

"No, his failure to do so!" Proctor Chronos boomed. "I will see that the three of you have time to gain the place where the decisive battle is being fought. Lady Tolerance guarantees you the chance of success. Go to the lair of the thing called Ojukalazogadit. There all the remaining demons who oppose Tharizdun are gathered in a final stand."

They are hated foes, we theirs!" Leda exclaimed. That is suicide. Do you seek to aid Evil and the Lord Entropy?"

"Better to prepare a ground of our choosing, Gord, and await the coming of our enemies to a place where we know — one not spilling over with adversaries," Gellor advised with no attempt to hide the anger and scorn in his voice. The bard was plainly critical of both of the beings.

Gord was uncertain. He looked at Leda, Gellor, then at Lady Tolerance and Proctor Chronos. "What my friends say is very apt reasoning. The demons would gladly rend us to bits for loosing Tharizdun, let alone slaying many of them beforehand. Having a choice of battleground is also much to the advantage of the defender, I think. What say you to that?"

"No besieged place can withstand the assaults of an enemy who grows ever stronger while the defense is worn away little by little. To wait for Tharizdun to come to you is to accept death — death for you, all life, and the multiverse, too," the Mistress of Probabilities said to the three.

"You must listen to Lady Tolerance," Chronos lectured. "She is but stating facts. The strategy we have devised for you has not just a chance, it has the only chance possible.

"True, demons are scorpions and adders, striking any near without cause — unreasoningly. Yet will Tolerance and I lend you our powers in this regard. There will be no chance to strike, not time to find opportunity — provided you use the situation to advantage. The masters of demonium will see you as an aid to their cause, and they and the rest fear the might of Courflamme and the troubador's kanteel too. Furthermore, the rings will make your auras most awesome to all netherbeings. So if you Journey there immediately, locate Tharizdun, and confront him without hesitation, there is the possibility of your triumphing. Do not linger, seek no assistance from any, even if some mighty demonking offers it!"

"And if we fail?"

"Then you will die then and there — or elsewhere, as the case may be," the giant-sized ruler of time said with finality. "You now have our counsel, the benefit of our plan, and the assurance of our help," he concluded. Proctor Chronos folded his arms and stood unspeaking.

"Well, my dear heroes?" coaxed Lady Tolerance.

After a long pause, Gord spoke. "We will attempt it," he said, knowing he could speak for all three. "How may we return to the Abyss most quickly?"

"We anticipated Just such a willingness," Lady Tolerance said with a smile. "Chronos and I have bent both time and probability to allow for your insertion into the dual fabric of both at a moment which is only marginally removed from this one. You are as ready and able as ever three heroes were, so now you need only depart. Go straight there to the stratum of the demon world which !s called Ojukalazogadit."

"Our mode of transport?"

Chronos spoke again. "Ah, that is what I forgot. Those bands you wear on your fingers will keep you three together and safe. The dark force of your sword. Champion, has ample power to transfer you from this sphere to that of the demons without need to traverse the many planes and dimensions which intervene. You will be swept there on the optional stream which measures time in the nether planes."

"Show us how to wade into the current this moment," Gord said with a fatalism that indicated much. "Scant hope is better than none, and we are beggars before the table of the rich, it would seem."

"Stand there and do thus," Tolerance instructed. "You think so badly of us both, I know, but it is all we can do . . . and more."

If she said anything else, the three didn't hear, for they were gone.

Chapter 21

NIGHTMARE BATTLES of the sort that was raging were no longer strange to them, but all three shuddered on being suddenly precipitated onto the horrible field nonetheless. Leda, most inured of them all to the vileness of the Abyss, was as shaken as either Gord or Gellor, more so perhaps.

"I had hoped never to have to see this realm again, should I live to be a hundred centuries old," the elven girl murmured with clenched Jaw as she stared around her.

"At least we gain the respect promised by . . . our half-hearted allies," the bard said, noting the chitinous excretion that Ojukalazogadit had suddenly created between them and itself immediately on their arrival. The demon-brute would not have their feet touch its being.

There was also a movement of nearby demonwarriors, a jostling to get well clear of the three figures who had suddenly materialized near their lines. "They act as sheep when wolves come near."

"Such sheep!" Leda managed to jest.

"And what wolves we make," Gord added wryly. "The fighting here is of usual sort for this place — tens of thousands of disgusting creatures howling and screaming and tearing each other to pieces. Nowhere do I see signs of the leaders engaged in more esoteric struggles. We must find Graz'zt and the other powerful ones here. Surely if Tharizdun is anywhere on this layer, he will be intent on facing his chief enemies."

"Dare we venture at large on Ojukalazogadit?"

"Dare we stand as bumps, girl?" Gellor said with a hard laugh. "This brute seems loath to have aught of our force touch its expanse. Perhaps it will make a pathway of cobbles for us to march over."

"Or try to swallow us whole," Leda countered, and neither she nor the others smiled.

There came a distant braying of great horns, and a thunderous series of noises indicating opposing dweomers at play. At that moment the surface of the demon-brute heaved as an ocean does during a storm, the waves of the motion rolling away in the direction of the sound. "Look!" Gord exclaimed.

"The very land seems to rise up to fight against the invading swarm of Tharizdun's armies."

"Ojukalazogadit, not land," Leda corrected. But she had to agree that it was much as if ground had formed itself to repel invaders. In the distance the brute had fashioned a volcanolike protrusion. From the cone could be seen something erupting and flowing downward as would lava. It poured only in the direction of the ringing besiegers.

"We go that way," Gord said. He stepped off the shelled surface to the lIvid stuff of Ojukalazogadit's immense body. While the demon-brute didn't attack, it did not ignore them either. Various forms of barriers to the touch of them were thrown up to its surface by the thing — horn, hide, shell, chitin, bark. All randomly, each in varying degree of thickness and extent.

They proceeded along, a bowshot to the rear of the colliding masses of demons and their foes. The roar and screech of battle was deafening and demoralizing too. "Think on your ring, dear Gord," Leda encouraged when she saw his steps beginning to flag. "There is stuff therein to counter the horrors we must endure here." She was very much correct. Gord had been relying only on his own determination and the force of his sword. Courflamme was of mixed power, and the evil in it was drawn to the battle. The struggle was beginning to affect the young champion, for in his mind he could not help considering the effect of the deadly blade upon attacker and defender both.

The demon-brute was creating swamplike sinks near, and from these malodorous fens clambered things of slime and ooze. Some of their fellow demons they suffocated and otherwise slew as they went, but these bits of the greater brute formed a wall that fell upon the packed ranks of fiends and maelvis about to break through the relatively few demon-warriors left alive there. The surviving attackers fell back in panic. Soon enough some greater ones of Tharizdun's slaves would drive them back to fight again. Distant voicano and fetld marsh-monsters notwithstanding. Ojukalazogadit was comparatively inactive. Was the continual combat wearing away at even so huge a thing as the demon-brute? Gellor gave voice to the question they were all thinking about, not really expecting a reply.

"It is Entropy," whispered a voice that might have been that of Chronos. This is the last hour of the last great battle. ..."

Then we have not one breath's pause to spare," Gord cried to his two companions. "You heard it too, didn't you?"

"Aye, we did, old comrade," the troubador growled.

"I as well heard what was timely," Leda called. "We're with you. Hurry!"

He went on at a trot. Leda was at his right hand, Gellor at the other. The increase in pace seemed to disturb Ojukalazogadit more than ever, and because they were making a virtual beeline, the brute sent up what might have been a long ridge of stone. It was rank and rough, but the surface made for very easy travel indeed. Gord increased his pace to a near-run. "I see the standard of Graz'zt ahead," he shouted.

There was a deep wedge of attackers driving into the packed bands of defending demons who fought beneath the dark banners of Graz'zt and the other lords with the demonking. It was no surprise that it was Tharizdun himself who fought at the point of the thrust. The archfiend was as starkly naked as when first arisen, and he carried no physical weapon in his hand. Lightnings and bolts of energy shot from Tharizdun's body, palms, fingers, eyes, even mouth, as his whim dictated. It was because of his presence that the defenders were crowding back Each gout of energy the terrible being sent forth slaughtered all in its path, whether least demon or proud noble able to stand before a charging behemoth and laugh.

The wedge was aimed directly at Graz'zt and his fellow sovereigns of demonium. Ojukalazogadit had attempted to break the spearpoint of the attack by the ulcerous volcano that spewed forth hungrymouthed stuff whose very touch dissolved most substances. Whether or not Tharizdun had laughed at that attempt, he did delight in the opportunity to punish the brute who had cost him much in the way of slave soldiers. The archfiend had used his force to crumble the mountainous upthrusting, and then proceeded to skewer the lavalike flows with other beams. They hung in the air, writhing, almost as if pennons being tossed in a wild wind. Then Tharizdun let them fall upon the heads of the demons who had been aided by the stuff, and even in its death throes the substance of the demon-brute was potent enough to eat away those it covered in its falling. Ojukalazogadit made the atmosphere vibrate to its agony as that occurred.

The demons guarding Graz'zt, Orcus, and the others there tried to escape the inexorable archfiend. Great dweomers played upon Tharizdun, and the

daemons and devils who came behind were burned, melted, shredded, rotted, or simply vanished into nothingness. As fast as a thousand were thus destroyed, a fresh thousand rushed up to take the places of the slain, and their dreadful master advanced yet nearer to his goal. This was truly the last battle to be fought in demonium, the last hour of the fray, the end of the Abyss as it had been. In very short time Tharizdun would reach the place where the last of the demonkings waited. These foes of the Ultimate One of Evil had no further place to go, no other choice than to stand, fight, and die. Tharizdun gave no quarter. Because of that, the lesser tried to flee and were slaughtered, the greater fought desperately and died with their teeth or talons gouging life from their attackers.

Suddenly Gord, Leda, and Gellor appeared in the midst of the towering knot of desperate demons, having come up unseen from behind. Only Graz'zt paid more than momentary heed to the three — he and Elazalag, to be exact. The rest, even Orcus, Marduk, Arioch, Nergel, a dozen others but glanced at the humans, cursed them, and returned to concentrate on hindering the advance of their deadly foe. The ebon demonking seemed not to be so concerned with the archfiend's advance, however, as to neglect the ones whom he regarded as the instruments of his forthcoming destruction.

"You have come into my grasp!" Graz'zt croaked through a throat parched from battle screams. Then he recoiled. The forces of time and probability might have been responsible. Perhaps it was the sudden pulsing — bright, then dark — from the unsheathed length of Courflamme.

Elazalag directed the Eye of Deception squarely at them, focusing its force on Leda. "One at least shall pay," the demoness grated with frightful countenance.

"Walt!" Gord shouted, and somehow his command made the princess of the Abat-dolor hesitate. "Time enough to settle any such scores between us after we do our work"

"What new mischief, bastard man? Do you wish Graz'zt's bollocks now?"

"Not at all. We three are come to take the head of Tharizdun!"

The feral eyes of the great demoness went wide at that. "If that you can do. Champion, then not any of the princely demons of the Abyss will dare to call you to account for past grievances. But if you seek out that one, why come into our midst?" she asked suspiciously.

"Play the Eye's energy upon them!" Graz'zt screamed in fury.

"Shut up," Elazalag told him without anger. "Well, Gord the Champion?"

"It should be evident to you — all. This is where Tharizdun comes. He might flee from me should his eyes spy me from a distance. In this place, sheltered by your massive forms, hidden by the surging dweomers. the foe will not notice us until it is too late for him to escape. He will have to fight against us then!"

"Very well, but you must go forth from our midst before his powers are brought to bear upon us here!"

"Agreed, demoness. Judging from the rate Tharizdun advances, it will be only a short wait indeed."

Gord's prediction was accurate. The archfiend, laughing wickedly all the while, advanced almost unhindered, leaving an ever-growing wake of death behind. The recoiling demons before him began to break entirely, and the scene became a debacle of destruction and rout. Only a thin scattering of exceptionally mighty demon-warriors remained to support the lords of the Abyss as Tharizdun came to within a hundred paces. Elazalag was about to command Gord hence when the champion suddenly darted from the midst of the demon kings and lords to confront the Juggernaut.

"You sought the greatest adversary of demonium, I know," Gord shouted to the startled archfiend. "Yet I think I now command precedence!"

"**You**!!" At that bellowed sound a hush fell upon the place: even the demon-brute fell into near motioniessness. "**You dare seek me out**?" the darkest master of Evil bawled, and because of the spreading quiet the query was heard all around. So was the reply.

"Dare? I am here! I will slay you!" Gord cried, and at the last words he rushed straight for Tharizdun.

The archfiend sent out three blasts of force meant to wither his small adversary into a husk Two dark rays of destruction shot from Tharizdun's hands, while a gush of fiery radiation vomited from the terrible being's mouth and splattered down upon Gord.

There was a sudden blue glow around the champion at that. Dark beams vanished as they contacted the azure sphere. The burning hell of the radiation belched upon Gord was reduced to a dim and spattering rain of

leaden ash by the adamantite force. Even so, the soft cinders of the malign effluent seared any exposed flesh, and where shadow armor was contacted the stuff made it pale and weak Bent low as if advancing in the face of a blizzard, the young man came on.

Now it was Tharizdun trapped against a press from behind, rather than the archfiend trapping and slaughtering demons caught thus. Gord was upon him too quickly for the being to do more than attempt a second attack resembling the first. Courflamme met the force spewing from Tharizdun's mouth, severing it as if it were a material object, ending the onslaught and threatening one of its own.

"**Die**!" the archfiend cried with near desperation.

Gord ignored such exchange, contenting himself for the moment with a series of rapid strokes. The sword cut back from left to right, upward on the opposite track then down in a overhand from high above his left shoulder. The effect was most gratifying. for Tharizdun's naked paleness was now crossed with red furrows. Seeing the clear power of Courflamme, the champion now taunted his adversary. "Who will die?"

Tharizdun lashed out with his bare fist. Despite his armor, Gord was struck so hard by the unexpected blow that he actually flew backward in a somersault "**You will die**!" the darkest of Evil howled as he threw himself bodily upon his smaller opponent and proceeded to beat and strike Gord with fists, elbows, knees and any other striking surface that could be brought to bear. The awful energies that were housed within the archfiend were sufficient to destroy the dweomer of shadow plate, break the enchanted links of elfin mail, and to bruise flesh, break bones.

His own stature relative to Tharizdun's great size, and the trained responses of nerve and muscle, saved Gord from being slain. He managed to twist, scramble, and get free of the being who was intent upon grappling and beating him to death in a furious melee. Courflamme remained in his hand, and as he got loose and rolled. Gord managed to stab the archfiend. Tharizdun sought to seize his foe and drag him back into an embrace of destruction, but Gord ran the point of his sword through the reaching hand, and Tharizdun howled and jerked his injured member free. That allowed the champion opportunity to regain the initiative.

The demon onlookers had given voice to a babble of cheering sounds when their chief attacker had been stopped and punished by the little human's ferocious and daring assault. The far more numerous mass of devils and other enemies of the demons had been instantly hushed or sent into hissing exclamations of alarm at the sight of the unstoppable and invincible archfiend battered thus. Upon this sudden turn of events the demons were sent reeling back in fear, Gord seemed vanquished, and their own fate thus sealed. At that moment the maelvis ululated horrid triumph, devils cheered, and a general cacophony of noise erupted from the million throats of the motley horde of evil viewing the life-and-death duel between their leader and his only remaining adversary. Naturally, even the dimmest of those evil creatures was aware that Tharizdun could be slain only by the appointed champion.

Then Gord spun free of the melee, and the diamond and dark length of Courflamme again played havoc upon the Master of Malevolence. Tharizdun was stabbed and slashed a half-dozen times before he could regain a fighting stance. Even then, the archfiend was pressed back and wounded again and again, for the blue radiance from the small mortal who fought seemed to be now nearly impregnable to bolt or blow from the greatest of Evil, while the sword appeared unstoppable by any device Tharizdun could muster.

Back moved the daemons and imps, fiends and dreggals. Not far, slowly, but back. A few hundred turncoat demons now scuttled away to stand beside the few of their ilk who still fought against the hordes of Tharizdun. A trickle of deserters too began to thicken the ranks of defenders who viewed the match. And a match it was. Tharizdun somehow managed to recover something of his form, as it were. The Ultimate Expression of Wickedness appeared to have drawn from deep down in the cesspool of vile power and stood his ground.

The recoiling of his massed legions gave the pair of gladiators space in which to maneuver and counterattack The archfiend wielded various forms of magical attacks as if they were hand-held weapons. Gord, with Courflamme, relied on actual physical assaults mainly, but the pure essence of altruistic weal bound within his adamantite and sapphire band also provided him with means of dweomered defense and attack as well. Despite disparity of size and the leeching of evil powers from the nether realms, it

soon became evident that Tharizdun, not the champion, was destined to wear down sooner. As the formerly allied demons began to skulk in growing numbers, slipping away into the enemy line, the archfiend realized his dilemma of inability to break free from the contest and the certain result of remaining locked in battle with Gord. While seeming to use even greater efforts to counter his adversary's successes. Tharizdun began to surreptitiously cast out a web to summon his last trump in the game.

It was as if on cue. Tharizdun gave a great shout, and suddenly his pack of a hundred monstrous yeth hounds were there to join in the fight. Just as quickly. Gellor was at Gord's right hand, deadly sword and golden ring set to keep the horrible dogs of hellish from making off with his comrade. To the champion's left stood the little dark elf, her silvery band also generating a wall of force from the spheres of Weal, while in her hand she held the deadly dagger before her. The yeth bayed and yammered, but they could not close upon Gord.

"**Mephisto**!" the archfiend cried, and the devilheaded hound charged the steady Gellor. "**Thrax**!" the darkest one of Evil then commanded, and that ghastly yeth was bounding toward Leda.

"Hold them off, comrades, or the whole pack will close!" Gord warned. He could have saved his breath. Both of his friends were staunch, and the two greatest of the horrid pack were met and sent back with magic and steel.

"**Again**!" Tharizdun ordered. Snarling hatred, as much for master as for foes, the two monsters returned to the fray. "**Pack**!" the archfiend called, but the remainder of the big hounds with chimerical heads were unable to force their way through the fields of energy that surrounded the contestants. All the expression of malign destlny had accomplished in his machinations was to engage two more foes with his chief slaves. Tharizdun cursed, knowing that because his power was incomplete, that he himself was also lacking, he and the yeth were not going to prevail. Had he only the third greatest monster, the one from demonium, then the force of his pack would be double. Instead of having to cringe before their opponents, the two could have snapped the humans in twain with slavering Jaws. He too could have his foe in his hand, squeezing the very brains out of the champion's head, had the Abyss been Tharizdun's from which to draw strength. Realizing that

that would have already occurred had he devoured the skull of the stupid boy-Tharizdun, the archfiend yammered in maddened fury.

The enemy was literally dancing in rage. Gord struck him while thus distracted. "To the void, fiend!" he cried as he laid both hands upon his longsword and scythed toward his adversary. The force of the blow sent Tharizdun back, down, as the archfiend's curses changed to a howling shriek of pain and fear.

Had Entropy been there, the entity would have long ago intervened. He was fully occupied in his own contest, however — the struggle against the howling madness that was Ojukalazogadit. Aware of the desperate situation. Entropy could do nothing. The demon-brute too knew of what was occurring, insane and near incoherent as Ojukalazogadit was; it sought to hold the entity and draw Entropy into itself, to bring both into a void from which there would be no return. Entropy condensed yet more of itself, putting all of its ponderous inertia into the contest, for unless it triumphed, the demon-brute would surely change the entity into something else ... or nothing. Conscious of the potential failure of all his plans, Entropy was for once powerless to act.

Both the greater yeth hounds were also in dire difficulty. The strength of their adversaries' rings enabled the two mortals to withstand the monsters' assaults. Both hounds, in turn, were not so protected as to avoid their foes' blades. Devilish Mephisto was sorely wounded, Thrax less so, but in no sense sound, for the dagger Leda plied had punctured his stinking hide repeatedly if not mortally. Perhaps the demonlords watching the duel thought Gord's mighty stroke was the decisive one. Certainly a great chorus of cheering came roaring from the throats of their onlooking warriors.

And Graz'zt chose that moment to work his own stratagem. "I'll have that!" the tall demonking said, snatching the Eye of Deception from Elazalag's unwary grasp. Although Graz'zt held his massive sword in his other hand, one was sufficient to grab and tear free the sphere. The demoness had been so wrapped up in the struggle that she was taken completely unawares.

"No! Don't!" She cried, realizing that her newly regained consort was about to commit the most incredible blunder imaginable.

The ebon demonking ignored her warning. He was already several long strides distant from Elazalag, the object of demonic power held out threateningly before him. "Vengeance!" Graz'zt shrieked, and from the Eye of Deception burst a force that contained all of the pent-up rage of the Abyss.

Gord was taken unawares, and the blast of energy struck him from behind. It sundered the aura of azure and slammed into the young man's body in an instant. Gord fell as if stuck by a tltanic maul.

"Now all is mine!" Graz'zt shouted in triumph, playing the forces from the artifact he held upon the cowering yeth before him.

Tharizdun arose as if the ravening eneigy refreshed him. "**No, stupid demon**," the archfiend countered. "**Now you and all are mine**!" With a flick of his fingers Tharizdun turned the Eye of Deception back and Graz'zt was felled by his own device.

Then the final slaughter of demonkind began.

Chapter 22

FRENZY ERUPTED INSTANTLY upon the resurgence of Tharizdun. The nearest to the event began to howl triumphantly or bray a paean of disaster, depending on which side the indIvidual fought. Devils, daemons, maelvis, dumalduns, netherhags, dreggals, cacodaemons and the others in their motley millions who were arrayed under the standard of the archfiend sent up a din of victory, while the demons, goblins, and cacodemons yowled in despair.

Graz'zt was dumbfounded, but the great demonking did all he could to repair the debacle. Flinging the ancient relic of the Abyss back in the general direction of his consort, Graz'zt gripped his huge sword and waded into the enemy. "It is a day to slay or be slain!" he boomed, slashing aside several yeth.

As the ebon lord of demonium approached, Tharizdun stood with apparent calm. "**Come then, Graz'zt! You are to be slain**!" It was no idle boast The darkest minion of Evil was even then gathering all of his strength for a killing stoke. The energy rushed into him. and then the two-handed sword was streaking down, aimed so as to split the archfiend from crown to crotch.

"Yess!" the demonking shrieked in triumph, seeing his blade about to strik,e true. It would cleave Tharizdun and end the fight, for nothing could stop the blow. Not now.

Tharizdun's hand shot up. "**Never**," he said mockingly. His bare hand met the massive length of metal. Ten stone of dweomered alloy, a great, wavy blade whose double edge glittered razor-sharp, was brought hurtling down by the tremendous strength of the demonking. Graz'zt had exerted every atom of strength, physical and magical, it was possible for him to put behind that stroke. The archfiend simply caught the blade with the naked flesh of his hand, and the blow stopped as if the sword had encountered a mountain. The keen edge drew no blood. It was, indeed, the demon who was shocked by the stroke. Graz'zt's whole body shook as the blow was caught, and its force struck the demonking's body so as to cause the obsidian giant to tremble as a leaf in a gale.

There was even more to it than that. Graz'zt seemed unable to loose his hold on the sword. Onehanded, Tharizdun held the weapon, still gripping

the blade, still not harmed. The demonking holding onto the huge hilt seemed rooted to the spot, and wracked by growing agony from the archfiend's power. Graz'zt began to shout curses. Then the shouting turned to a raving plea, and that in time gave way to screaming the most awful sort. All the while Tharizdun stood immobile, a smile of pure wickedness slowly spreading across his handsome face as he enjoyed the spectacle.

Elazalag managed to recover the Eye of Deception.

As the tableau of Tharizdun and Graz'zt held its near-frozen form, the demon princess used the thing to make her escape. She knew that her warriors there on the surface of Ojukalazogadit were now as good as destroyed, and Elazalag chose to make her last stand in her own castle. As she fled, so too the other lords of demonium who were able. The few without recourse to flight ran gibbering, most in crazed, suicidal instinct straight for their enemies, and with those went the bulk of the demon soldiers.

The crazed charge caused momentary confusion in the massed ranks of the devils and fiends who had fought against the wild demons. There was but one of the attacking warriors for every hundred or two of Tharizdun's troops, but the sheer insanity of the demons sufficed to enable them to strike down one or two of their foes before the sheer numbers of the enemy smothered their crazed attack. Then those demons were torn to gory rags.

During the interval between the frenzy of the last attack and the climax of the confrontation between Tharizdun and Graz'zt, Leda recovered sufficiently to crawl to Gord's side. She was strong enough to stand, but seeing the terrible events taking place around here, the dark elf wisely decided to remain as inconspicuous as possible. She found that Gord was breathing shallowly, but unconscious. She tried to bring her love back to his senses, but nothing she could do, even her healing powers, seemed to have any effect.

"Leave off, girl!"

Leda spun on her belly, dagger ready to defend Gord against whatever thing had hissed that command. "Gellor! Are you all right?"

"Yes. As right as that kind of thing can leave one, I expect," the grizzled troubador managed to add Jauntily. "You seem in pretty fair shape yourself, but Gord is in trouble — I can hear his breathing from here!"

"Even my restorative dweomers had no effect," Leda said with rising panic. "What can we do?"

Gellor wormed rapidly to a place where he could grab Gord from the side opposite the elven girl. "What we do is get the blazes out of here now," he barked. "Soon enough that maggot-spawn is going to tire of his sport with Graz'zt, and then he'll want to play with Gord — and us!"

"Do we have a means of escaping from here?"

"I think the power of the rings will do it, Leda. I hope so, anyway. If they have any efficacy remaining, though, it will be when all three are in harmony."

There was doubt "Won't Gord have to be conscious? And won't he have to lend his will to ours?"

"I hope not, else we three are doomed. You take his one hand now, Leda, and I'll grasp the other. Then we two must tiy to do the work of three. Think on a place which Gord will have harmony with. . . . Do you know such a place?"

"None of safe sort"

"Greyhawk?"

"But little," Leda said to the bard's query.

"Have you sojourned in the realm of Rexfelis?"

Leda responded negatively. "I am sorry, Gellor, but never did Gord and I have opportunity to go to that plane. We had so little time together . . "

"Don't start that — think! Where can we find refuge? Time is fleeting!"

It seemed possible. "What about the place where we encountered Chronos? Or the dwelling of Lady Temperance?"

Gellor pondered for a few heartbeats. "The channels of time's stream are too convoluted and meandering for the two of us to manage. Why isn't Proctor Chronos here? He could easily rescue us, blast him!" The words solved nothing, and the master of temporal things did not come to the scene.

"And Probability?"

"You already know the answer to that, girl," the troubador said as if pronouncing a curse. "Her pathways are worse than Time's. Never could we

bear Gord through the mazes of randomness and chance." Gellor urged Leda to consider all. "There must be some place. . .."

"Gord spent some period adventuring to the Land of Shadow," Leda said at last. "I was never there with him, nor actually in the realm myself, but—"

"But what? Why mention it then?"

"Let me finish. Gellor! My memories are strong — because Eclavdra has been in the place, though I have not. It is our only hope — unless you have never been there."

Now it was the troubador's turn to pause and consider. He had walked in Shadowland, but only on the verges of the sphere. Could he somehow manage despite that? "It's worth a try, Leda. Give me a bit more time to reflect, though, for it has been long since I trod the margins of that strange realm."

"We have no time!" Leda cried. The commotion around was growing more intense. The last of the demons was even now being slaughtered, and the very surface of Ojukalazogadit was beginning to heave as the demon brute suffered its final agonies under the oppression of Entropy. Worst of all, the great chorus of bestial shrieks from Tharizdun's followers indicated that he was performing some last degradation upon his victim. Graz'zt was finished. They were next! "Look! Already the yeth begin to snuffle and search to locate us. We must get away."

"Very well. I will attempt my best. Hold tight to Gord's hand and think on Shadow!"

Somehow Leda managed to shut out the riot of noise that swept over them. Blocking out the horrible scene was easy. All she needed to do to accomplish that was to shut her eyes. Then Leda managed to deaden her auditory input, so that her mind was a sea of calm and quietude. Only then could she begin to construct the images needed to transport herself and her love to the hoped-for safety of shadow. Slowly but firmly, the dark elven priestess built in her mind a picture of the plane of shadows, its strange light, its ever-shifting landscapes, just as Eclavdra remembered them from a time before Leda existed. It was a strange thing, one that she hated to do. Reaching back into memories of the drow woman from whom she had sprung caused Leda sharp pangs of identity. The crisis passed only because

she was do determined. The personality that had been Eclavdra was there, strong, waiting to reawaken, perhaps. Leda would never allow that. Drawing from the old memories made the task of retaining Leda in lieu of Eclavdra a very difficult one, but she managed.

Gellor too had problems. He could easily suppress all outside stimuli. It was fixing upon the necessary images that caused the bard difficulty. Imperfect recall meant broken images, partial reconstruction of a scene necessary for their movement from the Abyss to . . . elsewhere. That stated the quandary well.

Imperfect reconstruction in his mind might result in failure to escape demonium and the hand of Tharizdun. Closing his mind to the picture of the archfiend reaching for them even as he thought of that occurring, Gellor began to speak to himself in his mind of the lands of shadow.

There is a pervading dimness there. I see the blacks of Shadowrealm starkly, for each is different from the other. I see the grays too, defined by the hard gloss of jet and the soft. Inky fronds of vegetation. The pearl and the dove are there, and hidden in all are hints of hues we know on Oerth, but they are different, and there are new colors too. Mobile is the land, and unless it is scrutinized closely, it will slip away as a shadow does, for it is shadow. The milky crescent of Mool rises above, dark eddies of shadowstreams reflect opaline glimmerings of that luminary. Now I walk along in the shifting stuff of shadow, going between this sphere and all others. ..."

"Gellor! Gellorl Please hurry, Gellor! I am on the verge of being away, but Gord's weight drags. You must help me bear him along!"

"Hush, girl," the troubador whispered, barely interrupting his deep meditation. "I know that we have only seconds left, but I am doing all I can. Stay with me now, and don't speak again. We'll make it ..." And then he allowed his speech to fall off into silence once more as he resumed concentration.

The ground trembled under her, but Leda blotted that out Whether it was the demon-brute, advancing enemies, or the tread of Tharizdun himself coming near, it made no difference. She had only one hope. Leda returned her thoughts to the realm of insubstantial play of light and dark going ever deeper so as to obtain the land of pure shadow.

It was very hard for Gellor to go past the point where Leda had gone so easily. Shadow exists in many spheres, strongly on the material one, of course. It was from there that Gellor had to step. The nighttime's world comes closest to opening a portal between human realms and the plane of true insubtantiality called Shadowland. The thick shadows of a forested midnight are as a gate to Shadowland, one that can open if the bright rays from the heavens above are just right. Gellor envisioned the light of Luna and Celene making patches of contradiction to the darker stuff of shadow, while the twinkle of a billion far suns made starshine come to thicken the mixture of light and dark Grays grew stronger, with sooty blacknesses opening beneath the canopies above.

He stepped along the penumbrate paths thus built, and at the last moment of the ascendant moons' soarings passed through the slender gateway. It was as if he had to squeeze through a very narrow opening, and that space was closing, constraining, hurting. Gellor wrenched himself beyond, then pulled. Something pushed, and the burden followed the narrow passageway with a rush. "Made it," he gasped, falling over in fatigue.

"We did!" Leda cried with joy. "We made it. troubador, and so did Gord!"

Gellor gave a short chuckle at that, pulling himself into a sitting position from where he had collapsed on the grassy sward of Shadowland. "Now we can see to our comrade. ..."

"Yes, that we must do quickly," Leda said with concern clouding her former elation. "He is the champion. and he must be fit to face the enemy when the next confrontation takes place."

The wealsome forces of the rings will serve, I think." Gellor ventured. "We need to help Gord regain his senses, and then we three can bind the powers of the Spheres of Light to mending whatever hurt was done by the evil of the Eye of Deception."

The attack by Graz'zt was so stupid!" Leda said, for she couldn't control her anger at and disbelief of Graz'zt s sudden assault. "Had that filth not been so cowardly as to assail Gord from behind, Tharizdun would have been defeated and — "

"That all goes without articulation, girl. Think no more on it. Demons are what they are. Graz'zt was bent on destruction of us all for our humiliation of him — because he is a demon and we are otherwise. As a scorpion

might, the demon king struck heedless of the resulting damage his sting would bring upon his own head."

Leda spat as if to curse Graz'zt. "He deserves his fate at the hands of the archfiend!"

"True. We are not so deserving, yet I fear that the act of the mad demon has brought foul doom to us three and the cosmos too."

"Gord is living. He fought Tharizdun twice, and each time he would have bested the enemy save that the archfiend had some outside agency rescue him. He is champion, my Gord. He can win a third meeting!"

Gellor had been examining his friend gently as they spoke. The second duel was a near thing, Leda. Tharizdun had gained much power. Now he will be complete, and he will have his yeth. I am gravely concerned."

She stared at the bard in the twilight dimness of the open sward there on the plane of shadows. "What are you telling me?"

"The skull of the boy-Tharizdun is not here, Leda. When we brought Gord here, we somehow failed to create sufficient force to take that grisly trophy along. The archfiend must have it even now. ..."

Before Leda could respond to that, a faint howl came wafting to her ears. It was borne along on the aethereal wind, and it sent long shivers up her spine and ice into her brave heart.

"Now is the beginning of the end," Gellor said heavily.

She would not allow that "Come, troubador! There are shadewolves thick upon the Land of Shadow. They roam the forest and field. What we heard is naught but some pack of them voicing their fell presence to all the others. Come on! We must find habitation and safety. Help me carry Gord to such a place."

"As you wish, lady," Gellor replied. He made no further comment, and the two labored along in silence through the ever-shifting place that was the shadow world. Creatures of the sphere came to investigate, but not even the most ferocious of dark predators drew near. The three bands, Courflamme, and Gellor's kanteel too, kept all such prowling beasts and hungry monsters at a distance. In a short time the two came upon a community of the phantom-folk who were predominant in Shadowland, and in that village they found rest.

The rings they had gained from the transmutation of the three Theorparts had been used heavily. The energies locked within them were growing weak and erratic, especially since there had been no opportunity to expose them to any realm of Goodness where some restoration of their power could be made through drawing upon the forces there. In Shadowland the bands seemed very strong and bright, but anywhere else their auras would have been pale and dim. Both Leda and Gellor understood this, and both worried as to the result when they utilized the rings yet again to restore Gord to health and vigor. Would the tokens of Weal be drained dxy and become useless?

"We have no option in the matter," Gellor said flatly. "Even if we three are then stripped of our last defense against the enemy, we must bring the champion into consciousness and restore him to strength as well."

Leda agreed for many reasons, of course. After she and the bard had rested and recouped their own energy, they went to work to bring their friend back to them from his comatose state. The bands each wore gave up only a slow trickle of power, but along with the magic each of the two was able to activate without the rings, it was sufficient to bring about a gradual change.

Gord's pallor lessened, and his breathing went from shallow, rattling breaths to deep, normal ones, the sounds of one who is in deep and restful slumber. From there he was further restored, and before long he awakened and was able to speak. "Where . . . ?"

"In the realms of the shadows, dearest one," Leda answered softly.

"I . . . hurt What did this to me? I had the foe at my mercy. ..."

"Aye, old friend, that you fairly did!" Gellor said with true heartiness as he recalled the moment of Tharizdun's overthrow there in demonium. "Then the Jackal Graz'zt struck you unawares with the Eye." With few words but stark ones, the troubador recounted the whole of what had happened after Gord had been attacked and made senseless by the force of the evil relic in the demonking's hand.

"We had no help? No succor came from the beings who sent us to the battle in the Abyss?"

Leda shook her silvery tresses, her face clearly depicting her anger. "No. We were deserted there, my love. We were left to die, but Gellor and I were only just able to get you here to the safety in shadows."

"It is a place which the archfiend will easily penetrate," Gord said softly with an edge of warning plain. "We must leave soon."

"As soon as you are strong enough."

"Leda, that might be too long unless some outside force is used. It is time to draw upon the rings again."

Gellor put his calloused hand on Gord's own. "Easy, comrade. The strength of the bands is sorely diminished. I fear there is not enough to bring you to full vigor and keep their magical capacity extant. Dare we drain them dry?"

"We must," Leda ordered.

"No," Gord countermanded. "I can lean upon the force of Courflamme to get by until the rings are recharged."

"And thereafter?" the bard asked with uncertainty.

The answer was simple and given without optimism. "We take whatever measures possible to avoid the last meeting with Tharizdun whilst seeking some last chance to win."

"You mean .. . ?"

Gord looked squarely at Leda, even though Gellor had spoken. "It was very nearly all I could manage to face the archfiend last time we fought Unless there is some miraculous intervention, I have no illusions regarding my fate — and so too yours. He will best me with ease, and then the multiverse will sink into unending night"

Thereafter none of them spoke much. They avoided even the phantom-folk who housed and assisted them, preferring not to have to discuss what loomed before them all. Even on the sphere of shadows the struggle was known, and it was no secret that the champion was in residence in the home of the village's elder. Before that word could spread far, Gord. Gellor, and Leda gathered their few belongings, strapped on their weapons, and made their way from the realm of shadows to another place.

The three were careful not to tell anyone their destination.

Chapter 23

FRUSTRATION WAS INADEQUATE TO DESCRIBE IT. He had been within a hair's breadth of concluding all. and then his foe had somehow managed to get away. Tharizdun grimaced at the very thought. He reached out and grabbed a nearby slave, a female from an ancient race that had devoted itself to his service before mankind had recorded history. But she made no protest, died without outcry or pleading, and this made the archfiend even more agitated. "Is there no satisfaction anywhere?" he shouted. Nearby daemon guards cringed, and that, at least, brought him some gratification.

Just as he had finished his play with the stupid hulk that had been styled Graz'zt and sought his main opponent, the press of his own stupid followers had so obscured the field that Tharizdun had found it necessary to search for several minutes to locate the Champion of Balance. When he had finally sighted the small man, lying senseless and helpless between his two comrades, the commotion caused by routing demon lords had demanded his attention. It took but a brief interval to clear the way, send his chief minions in pursuit of the rebels, and then Tharizdun had again been at liberty to deal finally with the pesty little fellow. Gord.

It had been erroneous to allow anything to interfere with expeditlous dispatch of his adversary. The archfiend mentally flogged himself for not acting, for allowing himself a moment to gloat. The little mortal had been so absolutely defenseless, so completely at his mercyi Then Tharizdun had detected the slow accumulation of a dweomer, a spell growing about the three humans lying prone there on the slowly convulsing surface of Ojukalazogadit. Immediately upon sensing that gathering magic, he had struck, but to no avail. Perhaps something had interfered, although Tharizdun couldn't conceive of anything powerful enough, or foolish enough, to do so. With sure gestures he had summoned a force to bind the three victims in toils of powerlessness and pain. The dweomer fell upon them, yet nothing was bound. The force of his calling merely served to tumble the gnawed skull of the boy from his adversary's pouch.

"**That, at least, was worthwhile**," Tharizdun said softly to himself. Immediately upon spying the bony thing with its shock of yellow hair, Tharizdun snatched it up and swallowed it on the spot. Consumed it that is,

after having changed his head and jaw sufficiently. The boy's head had made a satisfying crunch as he slammed crocodile-huge jaws down upon it The petty spell, cast to keep it as it was. being thus broken, the usefulness of that act was immediately evident to him, too. Spells, powers and means to tap cosmic forces came back to him in a rush as the stuff that had been locked into the child by the Lords of Light spun free and lodged once again in his true consciousness.

"**He knew when he faces me that it was the only chance possible**," Tharizdun thought, recalling the moment. "**Gord was relying mainly on my lack of completeness. perhaps he was correct . . . but the demon's act was one of wicked sort, a fitting evil; and it is I alone who am Evil! Could there have been any other result than what eventuated? No, I do not think So**!"

To have gained the whole of himself again was worthwhile. To have lost his opportunity to slay Gord at a single, effortless stroke was infuriating. But there were consolations. He had completed his pack and now the three greatest hounds would hunt for and find his three little foes. Then Tharizdun would stride into the final fray without any doubt of its outcome. That was because only one thing could result. Now that he had his full faculties, he would triumph without fear of injury. The sword? That would be undone from a distance prior to actually facing Gord. Tharizdun had planned that contingency even when lacking a portion of his power. Very soon now there would be but one thorn left to extract....

"**Lord Entropy**!" the archfiend called telepathically with a force that sped through planes and spheres as a shout echoes along a deep canyon. "**Come and share my sport**!"

An indeterminate amount of time passed, then the deepening darkness indicated the coalescence of the entity. "You imagine the contest as mere sport now?" Entropy said in its slow, mechanical voice.

"**Is it anything other**?"

After the laughter from the being died away, Entropy spoke again. "Two near-fatal rounds indicate otherwise, Tharizdun. Even had you been the almost-victor in both."

That stung the haughty Master of Malevolence. "**You dare to speak to me thus? I'll ...**"

"I speak to any and all as I choose. You will do nothing; you cannot harm me, that's why." It wasn't entirely so, but the entity thought it best to always retain an edge by obfuscation and mental domination. There was yet much to accomplish, and the lord of Evil was a tool which had to be plied with force and much direction. "There are fundamental errors in your assumptions. It is wise of you to ask for my assistance."

Tharizdun was not fooled, nor would he allow the words of the entity to drift away into realms of forgetfulness. Whether or not there was truth in Entropy's assertions, the archfiend knew what it sought. If he used his powers to continue life, creativity, activity and the formation of new things. Lord Entropy was weakened and his power abridged. Tharizdun could certainly harm the boastful entity. The trouble was, such actions were very much against the archfiend's own desires and undercut his own domination as well. That, too, annoyed Tharizdun.

Because of that, he spoke to the other matter. "**Your assessment of the duels is what is full of bull-dung, leaden lump**," Tharizdun countered, forcing a deep laugh to underscore his contempt for Entropy's words. "**The first engagement was set up to take me without my strength gathered. In the second, the three rings were used to lever away all the forces I could bring to bear. No more can either situation apply. Sport it will be, soon, just as I stated**."

Ignoring the illogic of the claims, Entropy addressed only that which was of interest to itself. "You are so certain of easy victory in a third contest?"

"**Of course**!"

"The foes still have the bands forged by the greatest masters of Weal."

Tharizdun was not impressed. "**The power of those rings is waning as I wax, and soon the whole of the spheres of illumination will he closed to the so-called champion and his helpers**."

"Perhaps, but until that occurs they do draw new energy into the rings, and that gives them strength. There is the sword, too. Do you forget that it is forged of both dark and light? Any sphere can be used to energize its dweomers, Tharizdun. The three are again growing stronger, and the longer you dally here, the larger looms the chance for defeat — your downfall! You think it meet to use epithets such as 'leaden' in addressing me, yet it is Tharizdun who epitomizes inertia."

"**Untrue! I have been most active in my work. All that lies below the Plane of Hades now feeds my power. Each netherrealm now wears the collar of slavery I have fashioned. I do not tarry uselessly. wliy do you seek to incite my rage, you slow and ponderous bungler**?"

Entropy was unaffected by such words. "If I bungle, I also seek to prevent you from doing the same, Tharizdun. You must lay waste all potential fonts of energy, clamp tight the springs which could send power flowing to your foes. Ravage all, hunt them down! Finish the champion soon, Tharizdun, or the third match might go as the first went."

In truth, there could never be a fourth confrontation between him and Gord. Tharizdun knew full well that the next duel would be the final engagement between them. The archfiend frowned briefly, then stood and smiled his evil smile. "**But why do you prate so, Lord of Entropy? All you rant of may or may not be so, but the reason you are here doing that seems to have been forgotten — by you**!" Tharizdun drew himself up in hauteur, his face an arrogant mask of pride and malice. "**It was I who summoned you to me. I do not languidly sit while the foe gains strength. You were called to witness my last campaign. The yeth are about to be released. I will lead them across the planes and bring my quarry to bay**."

"And the despoiling, archfiend? Will you deny your enemy aid from all sources?"

"**You seek to do no more than further your own ends, Entropy**," Tharizdun sneered. "**I know your desires. For this occasion I concur, though. you tell me nothing I do not already know, but you may have whatever satisfaction you might from this: I will lay waste to any sphere which has harbored the champion, and I will raze all which lends strength to him**!"

"That is exactly correct," Entropy droned loudly.

"**Please commence your work**."

* * *

The exact number of hounds in the pack was impossible to tell. New ones joined the howling throng constantly, others departed for one reason or another. Perhaps a hundred of the things howled and slavered there at one

instant, then three times that number were present, giving voice to their hatred and insanity as they sought to destroy all that was not like them — fully alive, clean, sane, unfettered. Whether a hundred strong or a thousand, however, there were always three monstrous members of the pack at its head. Laughing hideous mirth, Tharizdun was always there too, whipping those three on from the center of the howling, snapping press as it ran across the spheres in spectral fashion.

It was the yeth named Mephisto which the archfiend chose to head the howling pack as it ravened through the realm of shadows. "this is for your failure!" Tharizdun said afterward, thrashing the hound-thing with excrutiating tendrils of barbed-toothed energies because the hunt had not brought Gord and his companions to bay. Somehow, just before the master and yeth came, the three had slipped away, vanishing into the vast and convoluted basin of time.

Entropy could not enter, and the archfiend refused to follow, for it was becoming apparent to Tharizdun that the being who was called Chronos had only enmity for him. And because of the wild confusion of this version of the cosmos now precluded orderly tracing of energies, It was not possible to scry or use similar means to locate his prey. Having loosed the hounds, the archfiend had no other recourse. It suited the entity very nicely, of course, for in the savage fury of destruction that Tharizdun and his yeth hounds visited upon a sphere, the coming of Entropy was hastened.

Tharizdun railed and cursed and was exultant all at once. He would raze the multiverse and rule over a rum rather than go down into destruction. Leaving Shadowland a dark desert, the greatest expression of Evil drove his pack onward. "You will lead into the domain of the master of Cats, thrax," the archfiend commanded. Yammering with special hatred for the feline species, whimpering in undertone too at the prospect of having to face such foes, the yeth bounded into that sphere. Perhaps their quarry was there when hunter and hounds came. There was such a battle fought, though, that even Tharizdun couldn't be certain. After great losses and much fighting, the realm was left a lifeless desert. Archfiend and pack, diminished in strength and much worn, flew off to seek the champion elsewhere.

"The portals to other probabilitles may be sealed." Entropy scolded, "but those three are somehow leeching power from those other universes nonetheless. Perhaps they need only a small space to do that; I cannot

determine how it is accomplished. If we — you, principally — are to triumph, that must be stopped."

Tharizdun was also aware of the succor that Gord, Gellor and Leda somehow managed to gain. The rings enabled the flow and served as recipients and storehouses of the force drawn by the three. "**You will bring tour weight to bear upon the gateways, leaden thing**," the archfiend ordered the Lord of Entropy. "**Portals can be barred from two sides, I think! If the lords of otherwhens think to seal me off, so too shall I shut them out of my demesnes. Once all here is truly in my grasp, then i will batter down those barriers. Now you and I will see that the gates are held sealed from this side**."

"You are indeed fit to be the Most Malign," Entropy said with actual admiration. "I will agree to do as you request," it added carefully, "for it suits my purposes too."

"**In many respects we two approach oneness," Tharizdun drawled. "More and more I become the brain, you the body. So shall it be**."

It was not all the work of the entity, that countersealing; archfiend and yeth-pack also had much of the labor to manage. It was deeply satisfying work for Tharizdun, that destruction and terror. It was no lessening of the hunt, either. Even as they shut off place after place, hunter and pack harried all in search of their prey.

The yeth called Thrax was fully recovered from the punishment given to him by Tharizdun after the destruction of the domain of the Catlord, so all three of the greatest hounds were there when the archfiend made Graz his chief dog in the harrying of what could only be the last refuge of the three. "**You shall be foremost, Graz my faithful dog, when I drive the yeth into the lands of mankind**," he boomed gleefully. "**It was such satisfaction lemons desired, and you, demon-hound, shall finally have your day**." The coal-black yeth snarled and snapped its steel jaws in deranged fury at that, imagining its victims' throes of agony, desiring to rend the archfiend too. The response made the packmaster even more delighted.

Not even the glorious devas were there to prevent the hunt. Such was the fell nature of the master of hounds that no longer could even a planetary deva survive the attack of the hounds, no stellar one face the darkness of the archfiend. In their final days, even the Lords of Light set aside their

aloofness and fed what force they could to bolster Tharizdun's foe. It made the malign being quiver with anger and pride. None could withstand him now, even the champion!

"All has been closed to those three now," Entropy droned slowly. "I have the answer to the rings too, Tharizdun, if you dare to face Courflamme."

As usual the entity aggravated him beyond measure. "**It is not simply the blade's puissance I have to be careful to avoid, inert lump! Even though your slow mind has not detected it, I have long since kenned the hand of others in tbs affair. champion? bah? that little mortal is as nothing to me! Do you suppose that I actually hesitate in engaging in the last combat because of courflamme? never, all-encompassing turd! There are others whom I must neutralize, then I will unmake the weapon, and lastly I will flay and devour the three who think they can oppose my might**."

"This is noteworthy, Mover of Malevolent Pawns. Pray enlighten so poor a thing as me."

Tharizdun thought Entropy's words conciliatory. "**Very well. The worker of Time and she of Probability both conspire to best me**."

"Us!"

"**You? Piddling lump! Why bother? No matter — I have devised means to make those efforts worthless**."

"Beware, archfiend, you have much hubris, and that is weakness."

"**I? you say I am arrogant because I know and utilize my full powers? that is so typical of lessers, 'Lord' Entropy. You do as you can to squash the energies of the rings made by wealsome meddlers. I shall now bring into being the stage of the final contest**."

"Beware! Caution is called for. Proctor Chronos and the vixen Tolerance are cunning and have many tricks. Long have I opposed them — I know!" Entropy's monotone was given as much force as it could muster.

"**You accused me of shilly-shally, entity. Now you say I must be dilatory in order to ponder what I had to warn you of. you are useless**!" Tharizdun jumped up and strode back and forth. He enjoyed this. It was a carefully designed exercise to awe the Lord of Entropy, to make the inertial being very cautious in dealing with the archfiend. An opponent in doubt

was an adversary on the road to defeat and doom. "**The delay has been because I was dealing with interference. In closing all avenues of energy supply to those petty heroes, I have likewise been sealing off change and time's streams as well. Even Chronos will be unable to lend his allies an extra minute, and there will be no minute chance of them avoiding the certainty of my coming**."

"I am unable to determine the validity of your claim," Entropy said. "What of the champion himself?"

"**You destroy the bands, entity, and I will see to the sword, courflamme. Gord is no champion — it is the weapon which is my true challenger. If the blade is unmade, then the man is no more than a mosquito to be slapped**."

"Possibly . . . Can you truly break the sword without having to slay its wielder, though? That is the question."

Tharizdun preened himself. "**Question only in your brain, Entropy. It is certain knowledge in my superior mind. I have understood how to brubg Courflamme to nothing for a long time now. Be so good as to faithfully perform your task, leaden one, and I will carry the day**."

Now it was Entropys turn to feel annoyance. It was an emotion that was nigh impossible for the entity, but somehow the archfiend made it possible for vexation to creep through the amorphousness of Entropy's being. "How will you do so much?"

"**Let us resrve that for telling afterward, slow-of-wit. Get on with your work, I say! I am off to bring to oerth a taste of my coming domain. The yeth hounds will have their sport over and through the little globe. Then, at last, I will bring my power to bear. all will be just so for my little drama**."

Grumbling most uncharacteristically, the Lord of Entropy slowly dissipated to move itself elsewhere. Even the entity needed preparations in order to bring the powerful bands made by the Lords of Light to naught.

As it faded. Entropy heard the baying of the yeth hounds. The archfiend had already summoned his pack.

Chapter 24

"IS THERE ANYWHERE LEFT TO HIDE?"

"That is a dispiriting thing to say, Gellor. You are becoming a detriment to this — "

"Leda! Please don't quarrel with our friend. You are allowing the archfiend his way when you do that," Gord said gently. "His question was deserved. It was also practical." The three had been chivvied and chased across the whole of the world. From the distant south, through the Moving islands, up and across Gonduria's vast continent, and thence across the Agitoric Ocean to western Oerik's shore. No fastness or barren or mountain chain had served to conceal them from the hounding of Tharizdun and his yeth.

"It is just a sport to him now," Leda said, picking up the thoughts from Gord. "Perhaps the bard is right as you say. Why don't we stay and face the archfiend?"

"That answer is simply stated, dear one," he replied to the elven girl. "We have been unable to bring our force into readiness. There are insufficient energies in the rings, Courflamme, us as well. To stand and fight so depleted is to invite disaster."

"Is there any hope of gaming the power you say we require?" Geijor was not mincing words now.

The question set him to thinking carefully. It had seemed that Chronos and Lady Tolerance had desated them there in demonium and afterward as the three had tried to find a refuge and restore their strength on plane after plane. They had failed, Gord admitted to himself, and had brought disaster to those who sought to aid them too. How many friends and stout folk had met their deaths because of them? Could he actually hope to achieve a state that would put them on a par with Tharizdun?

"I greatly overmatched the newly risen monster," God allowed, looking at his friends and shaking his head. 'If I had been less cautlous then, or had Entropy not interfered, the matter would have been ended there in the castle prison."

"That is apparent," Gellor said cynically. "The power you seek?"

The match was more even there in the Abyss. Entropy was locked against Ojukalazogadit, so it was Tharizdun and I. The force of the three bands tipped the scales in my favor. The archfiend was a thrust away from oblivion!"

The deranged demonking brought that hope to grief; now he is gone and we three face oblivion," Leda commented with ruefulness heavy in her voice.

Gord stood up. There is one place which might prove itself — a location capable of delaying the archfiend and providing us with the strength necessary to give us a fighting chance."

"You mean the city, I presume."

"Not exactly, Gellor. Greyhawk is the last center of resistance, true. The point of magical power is just outside it, of course."

"The ruined castle of the Mad Archmage?"

"None other. Once I delved into places there which tapped spheres beyond even the reach of Tharizdun — as he now is, I mean. Ultimate Balance impinges there, and the Lord Yang and Lady Yin manifest themselves there," Gord said with some enthusiasm. "The energy and negation I need for Courflamme could be gained there!"

Leda was ready. "Let's depart immediately. The sun is already sailing toward its nighttime sea, and with darkness will come the tumultuous hunt!"

"Would I could face those damned hounds without their filthy huntsman," the troubador growled, humiliated at having to run as a hare before Tharizdun and his netherdogs.

"I will lead," Gord said. "This offers at best a chance. Fully prepared, we will have only a slight hope. Parity was lost with a vengeance, and that opportunity will never again present itself."

Gellor arose to stand beside his two friends. "We three alone survive to fight. The remainder of the Lords of Balance are no more. If you can manage even a whisper of chance against the storm of the archfiend's assault, what matter? It is the only remaining avenue left to follow."

"It is one I have known of for a long time," Gord admitted. "I hesitated to use it because of what will come from our act."

Leda looked at her love, then at Gellor. "The destruction of Greyhawk the death of all who dwell therein and are gathered there. Is not in question whether or not you lead us there, Gord."

"Aye, that's so," Gellor nodded vigorously. "City and life therein are doomed, foredoomed since your rising as champion. Its central position has been evident always, though it is in retrospect we realize that fact now. Let's press on quickly."

Thus agreed, the three rode astride ordinary mounts across the woodlands and fields toward the greatest urban center on the Flanaess. The whole of Oerth was wracked by war, killing, famine, and disease. Here and there some pocket of near-normal life held out, surrounded by a sea of turmoil and slaughter. From one such shelter to another they rode, and in the course of the journey and avoiding the skyborne hunt that sought for their souls each night, their strength and power were drained further and further. Insane servants of Tharizdun ran rampant through the land, so terrible and perverse that brigands appeared as men of Weal in comparison. Wandering survivors, refugees, despoilers, crazed cannibals, and worse were frequently encountered. Whether ignored or scattered by the three, there was so little that they could do to help that the experience eroded their determination, sapped their will to continue. Somehow they managed, and near year's end Gord. Leda. and Gellor came to the low northern ridges that allowed them their first look at the last city of Oerth.

"It seems almost unperturbed." Gord murmured, seeing the river barges, and carts coming and going.

"Those riders yonder," Leda said, pointing away to the east, "and perhaps the dust cloud to the south too. betoken a state of tense waiting, I think"

"The comment was only a passing thought. I realize that even though the strongest of the Flanaess are gathered within those grim walls to forestall the fall of Greyhawk, no collection of men and more-than-humans too can fend off the archfiend for long."

Gellor scowled. "Our proximity will bring the matter to a head. Would it were otherwise!"

"Do we stop in Greyhawk first?" Leda asked him.

"No," Gord said. "That would be of no usefulness at all. The ruins of the sprawling fortress built by the Archimage are nearer to us than the city anyway. Let's make for them immediately."

In a short time the three located a faint trace that led them to the old castle. Although they passed through an unfamiliar gate, Gord's memory was good. The way to the depths of the citadel's subterranean mazes was indelibly etched in his mind. Before descending, they paused, ate a little, and rested. When the sun in the leaden sky was near its zenith, the young champion led the two into the ruins and downward into the central heart of the underground beneath.

At the bottom of a well-like shaft, Gord paused a moment. "I wonder what ever befell that self-seeking mage who first brought me here...."

Leda had heard the tale of Gord and Chert having to face the dangers that the greedy spell-binder had exposed them to. "Some just fate, no doubt. Thank him for his actions, though, Gord. You plan to use the knowledge he inadvertently lent you to foil the Ultimate Evil."

"Yes, so I do, dear little conscience. Between you and Gellor I get no peace."

The bard managed to clip short the words that rose in his throat. "If we don't. . ."

"Don't what?" his friend asked.

"Don't stop reminiscing like old folk and get to business.' Gellor substltuted, "we'll attract an unwarned audience for our further descent!" He had thought that peace would never come — obliteration at best an eternity of suffering in a half-aware state under Tharizdun's tender mercies at worst. Thoughts such as those were better unvoiced, and the troubador wondered why he had allowed a hint of such despondent considerations to be uttered.

"With our rings the process is almost no challenge. Come on, let's descend to the realms that exist beneath the actuality of Greyhawk Castle."

* * *

"I have sealed the fate of the rings," Entropy droned, the uniformity somehow conferring a tone of smugness.

"**Have you now? I am much impressed**," Tharizdun said with equal smugness. "**However did you accomplish such a wonder**?"

"That is simple," the entity purred. "I lured the three into the welter of dimensions and planes which impinge upon the substance of Oerth beneath the construction of the Archimage."

"**Oh, my! How did you manage that feat? It must have required exceptional genius**."

"I spread much of myself to encompass those mortals, and as a noose tightens, I drew the weight of desolation inward. They went before it as sheep."

Tharizdun could barely contain himself. "**Couldn't I have been op some small assistance to you in that effort, Lord of Entropy**?"

The darkness seemed to shrug. "The thought never occurred to me."

There was delight in the heart of the archfiend. The entity could be manipulated, hoodwinked, and even played as one would a lute! "**So the champion and two would-be heroes are gone to ground, so to speak**."

"That is well put. They delve below the ruined fortress even now. They will be exactly where I desire when your full power waxes strongest too, I might add."

"**Master inertia, your alliance is most beneficial. Soon now your reward will oome to its fullness. I will take pleasure in having one such as you there in my dominance of all**!"

Tharizdun wiped his hand across his beautifully evil features, keeping his face a mask, mind an unreadable blank shielded by his best dweomers. "**As you have alerted me, I believe I should rouse the yeth and ready another hunt. the pack will enjoy the chase through the depths in which those three foolishly stray, will they not**?"

Entropy was uninterested. "What those hounds like or dislike is unknown to me. Do I have your assurance that if I risk the negation of the bands, you will bring the champion to his final battle?"

"**The yeth hounds are for just such a purpose, and I too am prepared to fight the three again**."

"Courflamme?"

The archfiend waved his hand airily. "**Have you forgotten what I said in that regard? No matter. Your sly trap has also benefited me. The blade is most vulnerable at a certain place there beneath Greyhawk**." There was far more, but Tharizdun didn't speak of it. He had done most of the work that Entropy claimed, of course. With carefully orchestrated moves, the three had been forced to the place they now were. By wild yeth harrying them, lands torn by strife, spheres devastated, avenues barred. champion and heroes had been put into the exact place Tharizdun wanted them to be.

Did the ultimate expression of Evil recognize that his destruction and slaughter led along a path that ended in the inevitability of extinction? Extinction of not a race or species, but the annihilation of all life followed by the cessation of activity in all aspects of the multiverse? Tharizdun did ponder that very consideration. He wrote off the whole question as ridiculous. In a cosmos of infinite probabilities, infinite realitles, what mattered a few billion deaths? Even the snuffing out of a galaxy or two? Entropy sought vainly to rule in a limitless arena where life, energy, or simply motion would always spawn itself. Hubris always reasons thus, for if a course is determined regardless of what will eventuate because of its pursuit, there are always internal means of rationalizing whatever then occurs or seems probable under known conditions. It can't happen here, to me. . . .

Entropy too had reason to indulge in introspective questions. Did the archfiend labor under self-delusion? Or was Tharizdun's seeming hubris no false and bloated confidence in his own ability? What if that being could somehow sustain a wholeness of evil activity and repression that blanketed every aspect of the multiverse but failed to bring nullity? That was as unacceptable a thought to the entity as was sharing to the archfiend. If Tharizdun demonstrated a confidence. it was because of his own limitations, his failure to comprehend the certain destiny of the cosmic all when a set of conditions came into being. The stage was set, just as the archfiend had desired, but Tharizdun was but an actor. Entropy wrote, managed, and directed the actuality.

"We meet again in the depths beneath the castle then, Tharizdun."

"**But of course, entity of inertia, but of course. Shall we say in one hour, by local reckoning**?" Tharizdun heard no reply, for Entropy had already dissipated its essences. With a dark smile and wicked laugh, the

archfiend transported himself elsewhere too. It was time for the last wild hunt.

* * *

Nothing was as it had been, should have been still. The places where the existence of other spheres impinged on that of the world of mankind were diminished. The elemental presences were but small manifestations of power. Nature was miniaturized. The mighty Yang and Yin were pygmy-sized and powerless things who fled instantly upon seeing the three. A test of energies garnered scarcely a trickle of the bright force of creation, the same with respect to the dark energy of destruction.

"The elements provided virtually nothing," Gord said unbelievingly, "and now Balance proves to be likewise inadequate. Some great change has been wrought here."

"Do our enemies see so far into the future that they can do thus?" Gellor was speaking more to himself than to his comrades, grim wonder on his visage.

Leda comprehended the actuality. "It is the hedging off which has done this, bard. When we were barred from plane and probability line, this nexus of such spheres was abridged. I am sure of it, for how else could the diminished states of the places have come about? Gord certainly has not misremembered."

"That's true enough. I have no memory lapse. There is still one place left which I recall. The hillman caused me some grief there. . . ." Gord paused and blinked away a rising tear as he thought of Chert. "Gone now, vanished with the rest. No sense in such maudlin meandering. We have a problem to overcome!"

The three went onward until coming to an extensive cavern wherein lay a small lake of glittering water. The surface of the pond was undulating, as if monstrous saurians were cavorting beneath it, and the water had a sickly disturbing sheen. "Eeerg! What is this?" Gellor asked with loathing written on his face as he viewed the place.

"It is disgusting," Leda agreed, looking at Gord for enlightenment, for he had not mentioned such a revolting locale to them in his recounting of his sojourn in the places beneath Greyhawk Castle.

"It must be ... It can be only the Sea of Thought! But that is impossible! When I was here before, there were no visible shores, and the water was as bright as a sunlit ocean. Perhaps we direct it thus — our thoughts make it thus. Come on, you two, think of expansive power and the might of justice."

After a moment the surface became somewhat less disturbed, and the ghastly appearance of the big pond was no longer apparent. The extent of the water was unchanged, however, and it remained sinister. "This is the sum total of thought here, on Oerth, In all places which form its cosmos now, Gord," the oneeyed troubador said as he observed the scene. "When you came to this juncture before, the whole of the multiverse manifested itself in the expression of Thought at this nexus. Now Oerth's reality is cut off, a shrunken portion of the multiverse. It is a cul-desac which fills with ever-growing evil, so the sea is now but a polluted pond."

"Then we are .. ."

"Finished. At least, our hopes of renewing our strength to its maximal condition are, Leda." Gord grimaced, then made up his mind. "I'll draw what I can from this little lake, for ring and into Courflamme too. Can you manage likewise?"

Both of his friends eked what energies they could into their bands under Gord's direction. Drawing anything of Good from the pond was dangerous and trying. Thereafter, the young champion concentrated his thoughts upon draining any wealsome force left into his own ring. There came a trickle only. At last he used the sword to draw any remaining power usable into itself. The process was over quickly. Now the waters were shrunken and putrescent. He was about to lead them on into whatever was beyond when there was a sudden boiling from lake. "Are you causing that with your imaginings, you two?"

"No!" Gellor cried. Leda merely shook her head.

"Get back! The level is rising." Gord warned, heading back the way they had come as he alerted Gellor and Leda. The pond was rising as if some underground torrent were suddenly unstoppered and filling the basin there with its gushing flow. The liquid was not the bright stuff of former times, however. If anything, the waters that now rose were more hideous than moments before the surge.

"What does this mean?" the elven girl asked with horror. She was afraid her conclusion was correct and dreaded it, and the answer Gord gave made Leda's worst fears realized.

The archfiend and his minions are near," the champion said with a slow, lugubrious tone.

Gellor was not so despondent. They must come through these very waters. That's what is causing the swelling of this piss-puddle's volume. Let us by all means give them a warm greeting when their foul heads surface!"

All three moved back to a position of advantage and readied for the coming of Tharizdun. Almost immediately, he and his howling pack of hounds broke the tossing waters.

There was a stench accompanying archfiend and yeth. a reek so strong it almost overpowered the three. It rose from master and hounds and the stuff of Thought there. It was charnel and bitter, the stench of rotting vegetation and excrement too. With the malodorous assault came a din of foul noise that was as indescribable as it was deafening, composed of the howling and yammering of the diverse-headed hounds, Tharizdun's wild shouting and laughter, accompanied by screams from some nether place and the screeching and booming of the sorcerous means by which the evil company had come. Up surged the stuff of Thought there, and it was as a cesspool's flooding. Out rose the monstrous yeth and their master. and the suppuration of the foul pond was preferable to such as wallowed in its filth.

They reeled back from the assault on their senses, each one suffering agonies from the terrible mental lashings that the archfiend sent forth as he stood vaunting before them. Instinctively Gellor, Leda and Gord thought of some defense against these attacks, and from the ring each wore sprang a pale radiance to shield them. Gellor's golden aural shield was but faint and ale-colored, that of Leda's silver almost leaden, while the blue from the adamantite band that Gord wore was not the bright azure it should have been but rather a faded and weak gleam of indigo.

Somehow Tharizdun managed to control the yammering agglomeration of hound-things. He almost caroled his greeting. "**Well met, dear adversaries**!" the archfiend yelled to the three over the still-noisy pack of yapping and snarling yeth. "**No better place than the to bring out little game to its conclusion**!" Then he threw back his head and gave vent to a

long and satisfied burst of wicked exultation that could marginally and at best be termed laughter. "**But I stand here chatting inconsiderately — my pets have desire to give you their greeting too. . . . kill**!"

The hundred or more vicious and demented monsters charged instantly upon the archfiend's command. They bit and fought with one another for a place in the front rank that charged at the three. Great sprays of the noisome liquid went flying as the massive yeth came galloping toward their hated foes, a dozen or more with their insane eyes fixed on Leda, a like number racing toward Gellor. Only three of the hounds were in that part of the front rank which approached Gord, however, and those three were the greatest of the pack They ran in single file, too. The thing Tharizdun had named Graz was foremost, for the master had so ordered.

When the other howling yeth came close to the heroes standing to either side of Gord, they struck the screening energies emanating from the rings, and a crackling discharge occurred. Snarling or whining hideously, the hounds that struck the shielding force were tossed up and back. These sunk beneath the stinking stuff of the pond or were trampled down by their fellows there, mad dogs still eager to attack A second wave of hounds struck and this time not all died. After the third such assault, fully half of the attacking yeth seemed only hurt and enraged, held just at bay by the powers of Good that the bands discharged.

Tharizdun had little interest in those events, although he did occasionally glance to left and right to observe the course of the battle there. The archfiend concentrated his attention upon the champion's struggle almost exclusively.

Some three-quarters of the way to where the champion stood braced, sword held ready, the three greatest hounds were jerked to a halt, almost as if their master had them tethered and had yanked back on their leashes. Ahead of them, from the second rank shot six hounds of size scarcely less than those three. These horrors hurtled into the blue radiance around Gord, and as they expired in a hellish frenzy of clashing fangs and pumping legs, the fiery insanity of their eyes remained fixed squarely upon him. Now another wall of yeth was there, dying too, but slowly, and closer to his feet. Only then did Graz come forward again, tongue lolling and dripping some greenish drool, green eyes lambently malign in the blackness of his face. Slowly. At ten paces the monster sprang.

The deep howl of hatred died in the hound's throat as Courflamme severed it, sending the mismatched head spinning away from the hound carcass. Ichorous stuff of mossy hue covered the blade from tip to midpoint, glistening and stinking as it clung there. "Not much of a dog you had there, maggot!" Gord managed to shout, even as he prepared himself for the next attack. Tharizdun made no reply, but he did smile and make a little gesture.

The devil-headed yeth named Mephisto came charging. What little aural light had shielded Gord when Graz had come at him had vanished under the hound's evil radiation. Now this Yeth had no such obstacle to contend with. Its sickled, poison-laden foreclaws actually raked along the armor of Gord's cuirass as it closed. Then Mephisto was without forelegs, and then the yeth's head was cloven in two as were its shoulders, and the length of Courflamme was spattered with red ichor as well. "Another runt, maggot?"

This time Tharizdun was moved to respond. "**But of course! I'll send you one immediately**," and his laughter at his own joke was more hideous than the thing that came charging at Gord.

Thrax, daemon-headed though it was, reminded Gord somehow of Gravestone as the yeth hound came bounding through the cesspool. Moved by particular hatred, the young champion actually advanced eagerly to meet the thing, and his longsword moved with such speed and violence that even the archfiend could hardly follow its motion. Gord danced sideways, avoiding Thrax's leap, and sliced the whole length of the abomination's massive flank. Yowling in furious pain, the thing tried to circle so that its wounded side was away from its tormenting foe.

It was exactly what Gord desired, and a heartbeat later, the ribs of the yeth were exposed on both flanks. Tail next hellhound? Or shall I take off your pitty-pat paws first?" Thrax sprang again, dragging flaps of its stinking hide as it came. Gord ducked, Courflamme overhead, edge upward, held parallel to the ground with point behind. The hound sliced its whole belly open thus, and as he spun Gord saw it writhing and twisting. "Why, dear hound! You're all tangled up in guts — here! I'll. . . free . . . you!" And with three more blows he had ended the miserable things existence.

Gord stepped over the ruin, having first wiped the grayish-yellow fluid of Thrax from Courflamme. Although the blade still showed traces of all his

kills, it no longer dripped the goiy and noxious stuff. "Well, maggot what now? Back to the kennel for better breeding?"

"**Perhaps, little man. First too had better judge the other dogs, though — I mean tour comrades**!"

Gord turned instantly. He had forgotten Leda and Gellor in his fighting rage. Leda was surrounded by a ring of yeth. A score or more lay dead around her, but a dozen had their teeth locked onto the little elven gir. It was a duplicate of what was occurring to his right, where Gellor was being dragged down by at least as many of the hounds. He had to choose between them, and of course it was to Leda he went. Cursing, striking with lightning speed, he slew the things of the archfiend's creation. Each stroke of Courflamme sent another of the hounds into whatever oblivion of eternal damnation such things as they were had in store.

"Too late, too late . . . my love," Leda managed to say as Gord threw the last of the yeth from her. Then she died.

He was too shocked, too numb to react as he might have otherwise. With even greater fury Gord spun and ran to where his comrade still struggled beneath a yammering mass of the hounds. Gord struck almost indiscriminately. Bits and pieces of the yeth flew away, monstrous wails and hideous yappings sounded. Two hounds he cut from spine to belly, then the champion kicked the halves off his prone friend. Gellor's face was a mask of agony. Dead eyes stared from that face, and his throat was a gaping hole where the hounds had torn flesh from body. Unbelieving, Gord stepped back staring. Gone too were the troubador's hands. Gellor was no more than a corpse.

"**Not so much the warriors you thought them, 'champion**'?"

Gord turned slowly to look at Tharizdun. The archfiend still stood on the spot where he had first appeared, squarely in the middle of the noisome pond. The liquid was near inky now and almost solid too, so great was the evil of thought now extant in Oerth's limited cosmos. Nothing else could be, of course. With one such as Tharizdun dominating all, only wickedness and the malign could exist. "You are forever accursed, Tharizdun," Gord said levelly. There was no emotion in his voice, for inside Gord was as dead as his companions. Yet he was by no means surrendering. "To the death," he said flatly, for such was now his only purpose.

"**As has always been**," Tharizdun agreed.

The archfiend walked toward Gord, coming with slow and measured tread. Each step made him rise, and after but a handful of paces Tharizdun strode over a solid, if stinking, surface toward his motionless adversary. Gord shifted Courflamme slightly, readying for some attack from the monster who opposed him.

"**Oh, no. Do not think so ill of me, dearest champion! Although I mourn the loss of my poor yeth as much as you grieve for your associates, I believe in fair hay. I came to you, so you shall have first blow**," he said with what seemed utmost sincerity. Then Tharizdun spread his arms, palms down. Naked and bearing no arms, he advanced several more slow steps. "**There. Am I not at sword's length now? If you wish, I shall move in closer — just command me, champion. Here I stand, naked and unresisting. Strike**!"

Gord needed no urging. Courflamme came downward in an arc that met the exposed neck of the archfiend truly. Gord's whole body shook from the impact of the blade upon Tharizdun's unmoving form. Courflamme shattered at the stroke, its whole falling into a colorless powder that drifted downward as do ashes from a dead fire when disturbed.

As if reflexively, Tharizdun's right arm jerked around. and his open hand struck Gord in the same place the longsword had encountered the archfiend's neck There was a dry snap, and Gord fell to the floor of the cavern. His head lay at a right angle to his body, and only convulsive twitchings animated him. "**Oh, my! Did I hurt you**?" Tharizdun smiled as he spoke. The smile broadened, spread across his face, and behind it came the monstrous sound of Evil triumphant. "**And so it is finished, and I am Master of All!**" the archfiend shouted. His triumph abruptly ceased as he saw faint light surrounding his adversaries' bodies — Gord, the dark elf, Gellor too. "**Entropy**?"

"I have destroyed the bands," the leaden voice sounded, seeming to come from the three corpses.

"Stop, you fool! If you destroy those bands I'll — " Tharizdun clipped off his sentence there. It was obviously too late. The three dead were becoming as ashen as the dust of Courflamme.

"Now as to ordering things here, Tharizdun," Entropy started to drone.

The archfiend sent the ponderous presence a million miles distance with an irritated flick of his hand. Here was a war he could truly enjoy!

Chapter 25

THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN SERIOUS BICKERING indeed, had not the butler intervened. As often, the maids had spent too much time in gossip, and too little in preparation for the great occasion. Even the head cook had become involved in whatever little dispute the maids had entered.

Time to put a stop to this, thought the butler. "No more from either of you, hear? There's too much work to be done in short time for such wagging of tongues and wasting of energies, I'll have you know. If any of you have extra energy, I'll be happy to assign you tasks in my buttery. . ."

The maids sniffed, but busied themselves nonetheless. The head cook bustled away without comment either, though muttering something under her breath, as she went, about having to fix dainties for a thousand. In truth the kitchens were in something approaching an uproar, and drink as the guests might, food would be more in demand than wine, ale or spirits in the immediate future.

Soon after the arrival of the butler, others of the palace's officers drifted in. Steward, chamberlain, constable, sergeant-at-arms, chancellor, and even the keeper of the wardrobe were soon gathered in the great room. Then usher, porter, and verderer joined in the conference. "Is it true that all five of the Kings of Avillon are to be here?" one of their number asked.

The steward ticked them off by rote: "Albion, Caledonia, Cymru, Hybernia, Lyonnesse — yes, ail of them, and soon too."

The porter, being perhaps the least experienced of the palace officials, was agog at that. "All the way from those strange kingdoms to Hy Brazeal! For as strange a union — "

The chancellor shushed the fellow instantly. "Speak no ill of your betters!" The porter tried to become inconspicuous, and the talk circled quickly to other subjects. Then the knot of functionaries dissolved, for there was a myriad of things to accomplish and only a few hours left for them to manage their tasks. Even with staffs varying in size from only a handful, in the case of the porter, to the steward's scores, there never seemed to be enough hands.

"He comes!" an equerry said hastily. The uproar of preparation increased at those words, then suddenly calmed to become an almost orchestrated

movement like a dance. Guards snapped to attention, servitors stood ready, and all but the most important of ministerial and domestic staff found their assigned places and routine functions for such an occasion.

The master of the palace entered through the great double doors of the hall. "All is in readiness. Your Sagacity," the steward pronounced.

As if there might be some untruth in his servant's assertion, the master surveyed things around most carefully. Finally, after a long scrutiny, he agreed. "Very good. Major domo, place the household under the supervision of the seneschal. He shall have to miss the rite, but some must. . . ."

"Of course, sagacity. I will repair to the chapel immediately to see that the other officers are in their proper places." With a bow and smile of thanks, the steward departed.

There was nothing else for him to do but to take his own place in the temple area and greet the arriving guests, noble, royal, and those of yet more exalted status. Think of it! Well, upon reflection, he was himself now a "personage', one to whom even emperors bowed. The business of being Demiurge was still strange and a bit uncomfortable to him, but considering the alternative, there was no comparison. "I'll get used to it . . ."

"Your pardon, Sagacity? I did not understand you properly. ..."

"Never mind, third equerry. I simply expressed a thought out loud."

* * *

". . . and join together in union inseparable for eternity the two great estates here come together. Now shall the King of the one bestow his kiss upon the Queen of the other," intoned the pontiff as he beamed effusively upon the royal couple before him and the great assemblage of guests seated beyond. Upon seeing that the proper embrace had been accomplished, the priest resumed his ceremony, voice resonant, obviously well trained for ritual orations lasting for what seemed an eternity to those little interested in such things.

Far to the rear and well out of earshot of the really important persons there, two young knights stood fidgeting and uncomfortable. "I can say one thing for our new lord," the taller of the pair whispered.

"What's that?" the shorter asked quietly.

"He can certainly stage one rousing festival!" his companion said with real enthusiasm. "I've never seen so much food and drink — and the ladies!" At the last word the young fellow whistled softly, and a nearby petty lord turned and sent a scowl in the direction of the two.

"Softly. . . ." his friend hissed. Then he smiled broadly. "I can but concur, though, brother. This new Demiurge of ours does things right. The whole of our land of Hy Brazeal is filled with tales of his grandness."

"That's so; and have you heard of his exploits? For a Personage, our Gellor is one tough man!"

"Not man, oaf! He is Demiurge! Tell me, from what kingdom does his name hail?"

"I have no idea. . . . Hsst! The garrulous pontiff concludes."

"... all ye present be ready to salute the Rex Felis Gord and Queen Leda of Shadowrealm!" came the resonant tones from the priest, and both knights sprang into a chivalrous stance as the smiling bride and groom were blessed and peals of music began to thunder the recessional.

* * *

In a distant yet proximate otherwhen and alltime, Proctor Chronos and Lady Tolerance turned from their viewing of the nuptials. "Would we could have explained all to those three good folk," Chronos said.

"As well as having means to prevent their torments ere they could pass to this alternate reality," she added. "But we had no such choices, though I be mistress of alternatives, and you are master of time's many channels."

"So true, my lady, so true. Had that vile scum detected our trap, the whole would have come a cropper, as they say."

Lady Tolerance was uncertain if he meant Tharizdun, the lord of Entropy, or both when he mentioned "scum." It covered both so well she decided not to ask. "They sealed their own tomb, didn't they, Chronos? And all to defeat a trio of mortals with little but some small tokens of power."

"That they did, but the tokens were quite puissant, considering. Remember it was the three rings which drew all of Entropy's essence into that one pocket cosmos. It was if the entity willingly climbed into his own crypt and shut it fast afterward."

"It is not for eternity.. . ."

"No, not in terms of the multiverse, good lady. He and Tharizdun will have some length of stay there in the severed continuum, though. After a few ages have rolled the archfiend will expire, I suppose. Then the Lord of Entropy will be loose everywhere again."

"Are you so certain as to the eventual winner?"

"Not even Evil can withstand the creeping inroads of inertia. That one will eventually bring even you and I down . . . perhaps. There is much new energy and life to be sent into the multiverse whilst the thug is caged, of course!"

"Ah yes," Lady Tolerance agreed. "Millennia without unwanted decay! There is much for me to do, and you'll have your hands full as well, marking and charting without interference, won't you?"

"A pleasurable prospect," Chronos said, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

She thought of Entropy's gullibility. "The inert one was so anxious to squash out all vitality with his deadening weight that he totally ignored the many probable outcomes of his own cooperation with the Archfiend."

"Not surprising," Chronos noted. "Even I have trouble trying to second-guess probability when there are more than a score or so variables in the equation. But of course we had to be most spare in allowing the champion and his comrades time and opportunity. We did a masterful job, didn't we? It all seemed perfectly natural. The right inspiration at the correct moment, and no chance for failure."

"No chance, for Probability was being ruled. Time meted out exactly."

"I was particularly proud of your diverse solution to the rescue of the three, wondrous lady."

"As Tharizdun unmade the sword by the same progression of evil which had given Courflamme such might, he thought he was demolishing the truth of the weapon. Of course, the blade was augmented incredibly by addition of the destructive and creative forces which came into it during the time of confrontation. Basically, however, Courflamme was of Balance. Tharizdun should have remembered that. It was shadow and dawn through dewdrops, forged in and of the elements. All in all, a very mundane weapon."

"As he destroyed it, its three components were freed to give life again to Gord and Leda and the bard too," Chronos ruminated. "Entropy then helped to send them into our prepared alternate existence, with the blessings of Weal, as he destroyed the rings.

The Mistress of Probabilities became solemn. "The price which had to be paid . .

"Most of the good ones, the ones of neutral aspect as well, are now incarnated here. Those who were instrumental in the war, the ones who paid with the greatest suffering and even death agonies, are now rewarded too."

"You refer to Gord, now Lord of Cats, and Leda who rules the shadowsphere, I suppose. Those two are well suited to their domains — and to each other!"

"Do you forget the old troubador? Gellor has much before him, and most of it wealsome, I should suspect. They are but three of the many now finding their new lives on the rich lands of Yarth. Bah! I begin to run on insufferably, and with things you know better than I, lady."

True Proctor Chronos, but I enjoy hearing you say so, for it is ever satisfying to hear praise." She laughed, and the Lord of Time smiled ruefully. He hadn't meant to shower Lady Tolerance with such admiring phrases. Friends or no, they could well be at odds soon, although of most friendly manner. The contest between them now had yet longer span ahead than ever before. "Well. . . ?"

"Well indeed. Changing Lady! Let us two see what we can devise in the way of new prospects for ourselves."

"Proctor! I am shocked!" Chronos stood up. "Wait," Lady Tolerance implored. "Not so shocked as to refuse your suggestion! If you have the time, I am the one for variations."

* * *

If indeed a whole cosmos was gone, a world devastated and sunk into forgotten nothing, the gray city depopulated, and all that went with it consigned to the flames of gross Evil, life still persisted. In truth, it burgeoned in freshness and vitality throughout the multiverse, in the conjoined realms of shadow and of the felines who walked through the

night, Gord and Leda, and on a riotous new world called Yarth. The one-eyed overseer of its precincts was likely to prove a worthy Demiurge.

Evil won . . . and lost. It is the way of things, and always a new adventure awaits — just around the bend of the road.